Propter Nos

Reflections on
the Movement Moment
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Introduction

Reflections on the "Movement Moment"

True Leap Publishing Collective

In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois warned that "Negro blood has a message for the World."[1] Over a century past his premonition, the social field continues to be saturated with this foreboding blood. Such blood stains the very ground on which we stand, the very field in which we see, the very atmosphere through which we feel. In cyclical fashion, summer after summer, national attention fixes itself on the effects of a state-condoned anti-Black genocide that is neither historically unprecedented, nor wholly grasped in its systemic totality. In this anti-Black heteropatriarchal capitalist world, under white civil society's reign of terror, every summer is a red summer; every day is marked by the ceaseless shedding of Black blood. What is its message for the world? How can we assure the world listens? The works collected in this inaugural issue of Propter Nos mark the first in a series of attempts to bring together a wide range of critical analyses and poetic projects that decipher the message written in blood. The goal of this first publication is to produce a space for commentary and reflection on the last half-decade of an emergent Black protest movement. Forgoing a paternalistic posture or the assumption that a "pure" form of political consciousness is attainable, our publishing collective sees the role of this publication as merely a tool among many other tools. With this publication we only wish to 1.) problematize the discourse that frames and informs the popular movement's terms of engagement, 2.) generate modes of analysis that demystify the circulation and consumption of images of racial and sexual violence in the media, 3.) revise and revisit the three-pronged cultural project of the Black arts, aesthetics, and studies movements, 4.) provide an outlet in which information from counterintelligence operations *for* the Black movement *against* the racist capitalist state can be recorded, accumulated, and disseminated.

We are inhabiting a so-called "movement moment." But of more profound importance might be conceptualizing how we also inhabit a *reformist* moment—one in which the rhetorics, iconography, and cultural structures that normalize state terror and gendered-racial criminalization are in the process of significant changes. As history has proven, so long as the root structures of this system and worldview are

left intact, white-supremacist law-and-order will merely be reformed, refashioned, and reproduced. Emphasizing this perspective on the current historical moment, demands that we not only see the perpetuation of this system in the promotion of "Trumpism" and reactionary white nationalist interests, but with the Black protest movement's co-optation by multiculturalist liberals of the Democratic Party (are they not also US nationalists?), the maneuvers of a Black managerial class to redirect dissidence and political insurrection, and the disciplining of radical praxis by optimistic postracial progressives of all stripes. Pushing such a framework further, an organizing principle of this publication not only contemplates the liberal reformist character of the dominant political discourse, but urges readers to also consider the Black protest movement's own internal contradictions and compatibility with settler state hegemony, corporate capitalism, and bourgeois ideals—a critical move that also concerns itself with the impact of patriarchy, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia ableism, opportunism, pacifism, and anti-Black racism *within* our organizations and community spaces. We therefore suggest an application of the Black Liberation Army's principle of "unity-criticism-unity" (which differs drastically from tepid liberal conceptions of postracist "unity" and "coalition").[2] It is a principle attuned to the demands of unity with accountability and requires that our own movements and the ethical basis of collective action is subjected to persistent analysis, reassessment, and critique. This also applies to the analysis of strategy, tactics, operations, logistics, and the politics of organization. Moreover, we hope this publication can in some small way contribute to the further growth of an autonomous base of power for the Black/Prisoner liberation struggle; one that transcends the spatial and material limitations of the current social order. Future issues of Propter Nos will thus be dedicated to imagining, outlining, and further establishing lines of communication, theorizing, and pedagogical practice between "free" and "unfree" worlds.

Our publishing collective takes seriously the matter and materiality of Black life. It follows that the work collected in this first issue is indebted to a long political-intellectual tradition of Black theorists, cultural workers, educators, and radical activists whose work has aimed to deconstruct the shifting regimes of gratuitous violence that scaffold white civil society and American social formation. Whether through positionality, circumstance, or political inheritance, this milieu stretches across New World time and space: from the scholarly pursuits of early Black abolitionists and the conspiring of enslaved populations; to the militant writings of the first anti-lynching crusades and the consolidation of Womanism and Black Feminism as formal theoretical arsenals; from the strategists of underground Black/New Afrikan fighting formations, to the ongoing work of imprisoned radicals and queer Black, Brown, and Indigenous activists in certain strains of the movement to abolish the Prison Industrial Complex.

It is with respect paid to such forbearers that we adopt for this publication the title of Propter Nos. Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter invokes the phrase "Propter Nos" to rethink the sense of "we" that was universalized after Europe's genocidal conquest of the so-called "New World." Her essay "1492: A New World View" argues that Columbus' first voyage was animated by a white humanist poetics of the *propter nos* (in Latin: "created for our sake"). This Eurocentric conception of Civilization and human existence was based on a vision of the planet divinely created for the white European being—in contrast to an older medieval Christian worldview that saw most of the earth uninhabitable and humans as powerless, sinful creatures.[3] The *Nos* (or collective "we") in this parasitic order of humanism is constituted on the exclusion of the Native, the Negro, and the human Other from a subject-position founded on the norm of white European/Euro-American "Man." Within this conception of the propter nos, Wynter argues that the social and racial position of Blackness is located firmly outside of the collective human "we," occupying the lowest rung in the Great Chain of Being, and thus, rendered disposable, enslavable, an indispensible commodity. However, following the anticolonial, antiimperialist, and Black liberationist upheavals of the 1950s and 1960s, she notes how a new conception of propter nos began to emerge, compelled by Black people around the world attempting to abolish this "system of symbolic representations" that fixed the Black as the absolute true Other of the modern "human" (i.e. Man). By assembling this inaugural issue, True Leap Press aims to further this radical cultural-political and intellectual project, toward the historic fulfillment of a world based on a different poetics of the propter nos.

ENDNOTES:

1. W. E. B. Du Bois. The Souls of Black Folk. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007 [1903].
2. The complete definition of *unity-criticism-unity* reads as follows: "The process of the members of a group, unit or organization united on a set of principles and objectives to struggle internally behind closed doors among themselves by working (practice) together, observing and analyzing each others errors and then offering constructive criticism to each other to correct errors and overcome any shortcomings in order to strengthen each other and thus advance the group, unit or organization towards its state objectives." Black Liberation Army Political Dictionary reprinted in pamphlet form by Montreal-based Kersplebedeb Publishing.
3. Sylvia Wynter. "1492: A New World View." In Race, Discourse and the Origin of the Americas, edited by Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995.

1

Election Year: "The Motto"

Ashley M. Jones

We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal—
We hold Truth—men are created equal—that's self-evident.
We, Truth-men, are self-evidently created equal.
We hold these truths that men have created—it's self-evidently not equal.
We who are not Truth cannot be equal—our race too self-evident.
We held on for a truce between the self and its need for equality. Victory is not self-evident.
We hold these truths. What more can the self hold? What evidence is there that we're equal?
We held the Truth, not guns, to be self-evident, but bullets and words are not equal.
We held our lives, like truth. But death was even truer, its tragic certainty self-evident.

2

Policing and the Violence of White Being

An Interview with Dylan Rodriguez

Dylan is a Professor and former Chair of the Department of Ethnic Studies at UC Riverside. He was elected Chair of the UC Riverside Academic Senate by his faculty peers in 2016. He is the author of two books: Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the US Prison Regime (2006) and Suspended Apocalypse: White Supremacy, Genocide, and the Filipino Condition (2009). His current thinking, writing, and teaching focus on how regimes of social liquidation, cultural extermination, physiological evisceration, and racist terror become normalized features of everyday life in the "post-Civil Rights" and "post-racial" moments. How do the historical logics of racial and racial-colonial genocide permeate our most familiar systems of state violence, cultural production, institutionalized knowledge, liberation struggle, and social identity? How do people inhabit these structures and logics—make sense of it, narrate it, suffer it, and revolt against it? What forms of collective genius and creativity emerge from such conditions, and how do these insurgencies envision—and practice—transformations of power and community? The following interview was conducted by Casey, an editor with True Leap Press.

Casey: The US white-supremacist state operates today through a different set of discourses and cultural structures than in previous epochs. Your work interrogates such shifts at a level of depth and nuance that is of particular importance for emergent struggles against racist state violence. "Multiculturalist white supremacy," "post-racial liberal optimism," "white academic raciality"—such terms are utilized throughout your work to interrogate a myriad of theoretical and historical conundrums that define the post-Civil Rights era, particularly in regards to racial violence and subjectivity. Can you, in very broad strokes, lay out what you are trying to accomplish with these interventions in the discourses, practices, and forms of embodiment that so violently delimit the possibilities for radical social change in the United States?

Dylan: The aftermath of American apartheid's formal abolition has been overwhelmed by a grand national-cultural vindication of "Civil Rights" as the vessel of fully actualized gendered-racial citizenship. This fraud has, in various ways, facilitated rather than interrupted the full, horrific exercise of a domestic war-waging regime. For the sake of momentary simplicity, we can think about it along these lines: the half-century narrative of Civil Rights victory rests on an always-fragile but persistent common sense—the idea that national political culture ("America") and the spirit of law and statecraft (let's call this "The Dream") endorse formal racial equality. Bound by this narrative-political context, the racist state's mechanics shift and multiply to rearticulate a condition of normalized racist violence that is *condoned or even applauded by the institutionalized regimes of Civil Rights*. (It is not difficult to see how the NAACP, JACL, LULAC, Lambda, NOW, Urban League and other like-minded organizations condone or applaud domestic racial war, so long as it is directed at the correct targets: gang members, drug dealers, "violent criminals," terrorists, etc.). In other words, the contemporary crisis of racist state violence is not reducible to "police brutality" and homicidal policing, or even the structuring asymmetries of incarceration: it is also a primary derivative of the Civil Rights regime.

This regime is in some ways inseparable from the emergence of post-1960s technologies of criminalization that resonate with—rather than offend—the (defrauded) dream of vindicated Civil Rights citizenship. After all, the racial/racist state is still being called upon to legislate, protect, and serve the Civil Rights Citizen, even as it is the subject of militant demands for reform that will align it with the Civil Rights versions of America and The Dream. This is the contradiction that yields more and more layers of gendered racist statecraft in the post-optimist's Age of Obama.

The widespread, Black-populated and Black-led resistance and revolt that is responding to legally-sanctioned racist police killings should therefore be interpreted as a *complex* form of insurgency. It is, in significant part, a strike against the *respectable, non-scandalous, legitimated* forms of policing that have constituted the everyday racist truth of post-Civil Rights nation-building. This insurgency is also, then, a critique of the Civil Rights regime's complicity in that fifty-year process of national-racial reconstruction.

So the racist state has metastasized in the last half century, and created new infrastructures and protocols of civil and social death (the industrialized, militarized policing and criminalization complexes) as well as proto-genocidal methods of targeted, utterly normalized suffering, misery, and physiological vulnerability for peoples on the other side of White Being (the paradigm and methodology of human being that we have inherited as universal, unquestioned, and godlike—here i'm referencing Sylvia Wynter's lifework, of course). I'm thinking, among so many other things, of the levees in New Orleans' Ninth Ward, strategic ecological disruption of indigenous lifeways throughout the hemisphere and in Native Hawaii, redirection and

isolation of toxic water to the poorest, Blackest, and Brownest of places, and the seemingly endless continuity of legalized police assassinations of ordinary (and asymmetrically poor, Black, and Brown) people that stretches back as far as modern policing has existed.

So, if shit is this bad—and it's so, so stunningly clear that it is almost always worse than we want to believe it is—what is the historical responsibility borne by people who differently inherit and inhabit this condition?

I am against "unity"—militantly so—and full of desire for radical community (militantly so). At the risk of making the case too bluntly: we experience and condone banal liberal calls to unity (which are often depressingly nationalist or patriotic) so incessantly that they are inescapable (e.g. those stupid fucking French flag colors that folks superimposed on their Facebook profile pictures after the street attacks in Paris, which was like global advertising for White Lives Matter; or the absurd compulsion to insist that one is not "anti-police" when mourning yet another life destroyed by the full force of the police apparatus—because it's never just one or two or five racist cops, *it's what protects and enables them*). These are concessions to a form of political life (which is to say a particular genre of human life—White Being) that cannot be tolerated as such, if some of us expect to live or see others live. I think such concessions must be critically exposed for what they are: disciplinary exercises in assimilating different peoples' political dreams to the conformities of White Being. At the very same time—and this is the hard part—these critical gestures have to somehow participate in *creating possibilities for collective exercises of radical, creative, political-cultural genius that demystify White Being and embolden (or even productively weaponize) other insurgent practices and methodologies of human life.* This is difficult, scary, and beautiful work. And if more people don't attempt to engage in it, we know who will be the first to disappear.

Casey: Could you speak a bit more on what you mean by emphasizing the need to "embolden" and "productively weaponize" other practices and methodologies of human life?

Dylan: I'm talking about how necessary it is to take seriously how peoples (in the most differentiated sense of the notion of "peoples") have created forms of relationality, cultural reproduction, survival, revolt, and collective being under the eviscerating conditions of this Civilization. This happens everywhere, all the time. In 1496, 1896, and 2016. Down the street and on the other side of the planet. It's the underside of human being that the official scripts and dominant narratives of the modern world can never adequately rationalize or eliminate. This is to say that decisively displacing the universality of the White Being—and of any such universality altogether—is only a fraction of what is at stake. The fact is—and this is a

long-running fact, at least half a millennium old—there are other ways of inhabiting "human being" that *are constituted by the violent vulnerabilities normalized by global white-supremacist power, in all of its misogynist, colonial, chattel, and sexual normative (including "homonormative") iterations*. This is just what the fuck it means to try to live under the Civilizational regime. And this work of living, of being, of figuring out ways to *thrive*, when and where possible, absolutely does not require trying to deform and self-mutilate into the "human" methodologies of the White Being. Peoples everywhere have proved this.

Look, i also don't want to be too easily mis-read here. There isn't just one way of White Being, and we cannot overemphasize enough that White Being cannot be conflated with "white people." Undoubtedly, Fanon is still correct in stressing the epidermalized, physiologically activated structure of power that inheres in white bodies (however white bodies are socio-politically formed and institutionalized in a given moment). My point here is that White Being constitutes another layer of dominance precisely because it is capable of hailing other beings, inviting them, seducing them—and this is yet another method to humiliate and degrade (perhaps even "de-humanize") the "underside peoples" i am referencing.

Finally, we have to admit to ourselves that one of the most important struggles is against the desire to coalesce with White Being, both in the sense of political affinity and the conception of good living. It doesn't make sense to funnel all manner of insurgent activities (art, organized protest, underground political work, etc.) into demands, of this particular global racial order, that peoples targeted by White Being (now and forever) be enfolded *into* White Being, whether by virtue of Rights, Citizenship, Marriage, or something else. Those demands may be momentarily necessary and vital for the sake of resisting state violence, but have been demonstrated over and again to work, in the longer historical span, in the service of White Being *and no other beings*. What, then, would it mean to not only decisively displace the ascendancy of White Being (Civilization), but to also seek to thrive as the descendants of our particular, differentiated conditions of historical vulnerability?

Casey: Thank you for clarifying that point. Given your work as a scholar and student of radical movements that are engaged in political activity from within what you consider to be civil society's *carceral* underside (i.e. the US jail/prison), what would you say are the most significant contradictions or points of antagonism arising between the terms of engagement which define the current phase of popular movement addressing criminalization and police violence and the current (and ongoing) work of imprisoned activists and intellectuals? One place we might start is recalling the aftermath of the assassination of Yogi Pinell last year at New Folsom. In this moment, it became rather apparent that a number of theoretical and practical fractures still exist between popular mobilizations on the "outside" and the political

labors (and lives) of imprisoned activists "inside." Just going off the basic fact that news of the murder of this beloved elder in the Black/Prisoner liberation struggle (clearly orchestrated by the CA prison regime) scarcely circulated in the public discourse, barely galvanizing the sentiment of free world activists (outside of certain political circles), I believe, is revealing of the types of slippages and antagonisms I am alluding to.

Dylan: This is difficult to cleanly answer, because in my view (and experience), there are sites and moments of overlap between these forms of political and cultural movement that both illuminate and blur the assumptive alienation between prison/jail and the "free world." Further, my perspective is deformed by the fact that i am at best a reader, theorist, and interpreter of incarcerated radical praxis. Still, i think it's possible to identify a couple points of contradiction and antagonism between: 1.) movements by and of incarcerated people and 2.) movements of revolt against anti-Black racism and homicidal police violence that are based in spheres of civil society.

First, while it is not always the case that carceral insurgencies are led or predominated by Black people held captive, it is very often a fact that such movements explicitly recognize the carceral regime as a *paradigm of anti-Black violence*. This is why recent political and cultural movements by incarcerated people so consistently make use of the rhetorics, symbols, and legal archives of racial chattel slavery in their internal and public discourses (including platforms and demands issued by captive people engaging in hunger strikes in places like Georgia, California, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere). On the other hand, i think there is work to be done to adequately understand whether and how current, free world-based struggles against anti-Black racist state violence may be hanging onto a fraudulent dream of (Black) citizenship even as they catalyze forms of art, critical thought, liberationist praxis, and (Black) *human being* that push the imagination against and past the delimited institution of citizenship (a stand-in for White Being) and toward other kinds of political-cultural vistas. That's one thing.

The other thing is this: the weight of institutionalized dehumanization (and that's what the carceral regime is, in its gendered-racial violence) is mind-numbing, vast, and almost entirely incalculable. We can recite statistics all day, but there is no way to adequately communicate how the last half-century of criminalization and human captivity has permanently altered peoples' worlds. Here's the thing, though: people who are or have been incarcerated for any length of time spend a lot of energy—during and after their actual incarceration—trying to narrate and communicate this mind-numbing, vast, incalculable violence anyway. Consider it the voice of a human species that is illegible to White Being, and is largely illegible to those of us invited by or seduced into the ceremonies of White Being.

Casey: It would be helpful here if you could briefly walk us through how the "inside"/"outside" relation operates in the discourses and political imagination of the Establishment Left. I am also really curious to hear you speak more on the possibilities that "Black Lives Matter" offers as a mobilizing paradigm capable of disrupting this "inside" versus "outside" mode of thinking and seeing?

Dylan: Central to the formation of the contemporary Establishment Left in the US and elsewhere has been the emergence of a nonprofit/NGO complex, planned and funded by a collaboration between state, philanthropic, and corporate bodies (that is, both individual people and officials representing organizations). It barely takes three clicks into a Google search to see how the "inside/outside" relation is *established* by the Establishment Left. Incarcerated people (and formerly incarcerated people) are overwhelmingly addressed as clients or impersonal constituencies, and are invoked in rhetorics of state criminological reform. This is what leads to the Establishment Left's persistent return to notions of "nonviolent crime," "disparity," and "mass incarceration."

In their totality, these rhetorics reproduce problems inherent to liberal-progressive political desires, including the fabrication of a vacillating definition of those worthy of decarceration, and those whose criminality requires their civil carceral death. *In none of this is there anything approaching a serious attempt to clarify, much less directly engage with, the unfolding half century infrastructure of gendered racial domestic warfare.* "Disparity" is a bullshit concept, when we already know that the inception of criminal justice is the de-criminalization of white people, particularly propertied white citizens and those willing to bear arms to defend the white world. "Mass Incarceration" is worse than meaningless, when it's not the "masses" who are being criminalized and locked up. So there is some furtive and fatal white entitlement involved in this discursive political structure. As far as Black Lives Matter goes, i think it's imperative to appreciate the spectrum of people and political positions that inhabit this movement, and to constantly pay attention to how its place in the public discourse creates both opportunities for radical departures and burdens of political respectability that constantly attempt to domesticate its own insurgent tendencies.

Casey: And it's these liberal-progressive political desires that we must now more than ever be vigilantly criticizing in our writings, analyses, discussions, and pedagogy, correct? Even amidst the possibility of having a classically "Right-wing" reactionary iteration of white nationalist subjectivity, once again, residing in the Oval Office? I know you have written about a particular notion of fascism, as it relates to the idea of liberal capitalist democracy—one that builds on the incarcerated writings of Angela Davis and George Jackson from the early 1970s. Would you say a broader public

conversation about fascism and its relationship to the liberal-progressive political desires you are speaking about is necessary?

Dylan: I think people are already having the conversations about white nationalism and fascism in various ways, although once again, the problem is that these problems are reduced to a narrowed, particular, spectacular set of articulations (i.e. Muslim expulsion, Great Wall of 'Merica, Blue Lives Matter, etc.) rather than analyzed as the generalized political framework through which most acceptable, or "hegemonic" notions of politics and political culture unfold. I think Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Donald Trump are pretty much first cousins (though maybe estranged first cousins), in this sense. If we take a serious approach to the analytics of fascism, updated for the contemporary condition, the differences across this hegemonic political-cultural spectrum tend to be a matter of degree, not of kind. It's pretty easy to see, for example, the ways that Trumpism installs assumptively extremist positions and proposals into the public discourse in ways that catalyze and legitimate reactionary white (and overwhelmingly male) violence through symbolic, state, and physical forms. What a lot of us are in denial about, however, is how much this moment of reactionary white nationalism overlaps with the prior decade of multiculturalist white supremacy and the refabrication of US patriotism via "postracialism." So while not everyone agrees with subjecting Muslims to an American Inquisition, for example, there are some guiding agreements about whether and how people of Arab and Middle Eastern descent ought to be subjected to rationalized, responsible forms of profiling and policing. And the bottom line of this still-unfolding, historically specific policing and criminalization technology is, of course, the Civilizational formation of racial chattel and land-ecological conquest as the *permanent* (that is, *not* historically episodic) condition of *political discourse generally*. So what we are seeing now is a pretty fucked up situation in which some of us are actually surprised that people who look like us, and share genealogical blood with us, are fully in favor of Trump's Bozo the Clown burlesque act. We are indignant and shocked silent when we encounter other Black, Brown, Indigenous, and queer people outside of academic left and activist circles who tell us they might—or will—cast a worthless ballot for that dude. We should not be that surprised.

Casey: I agree, we *cannot* be surprised. And, accompanying these reactionary articulations, there is an entire other side of the fascist problematic, right? The gradualist reformers who "mediate" the crisis . . . who co-opt, defuse, and redirect oppositional energies into the projects of the Establishment Left. Here you have a range of "compassionate" and "caring" folks—from petite bourgeois liberals to progressive nationalists to an array of "color-blind" white left-folk—all of whom, it seems, desire more so to distance themselves from the backwards or "regressive"

whiteness embodied in the Trump campaign, rather than challenge it in any serious or politically meaningful way. And when the desire to confront it *does* exist—when it is out there, loud and visible—that very desire appears to be a force that legitimates their own privileged positions. They become the "reasonable" whites . . . the "civil" whites . . . the transcendent historical subjects capable of continuing the white-supremacist nation-building project. "I am not Donald Trump," therefore my presence and manner of being/Being is universally justified. Or "I am not that murderous pig," therefore my imagined physiological integrity, my chauvinistic comportment, my freedom of bodily mobility couldn't possibly be linked in a parasitic way to the policing and criminalization of Black people, or *that which necessitates* the crisis of racialized capture and incarceration. It's a kind of postracial desire characteristic of left-liberal whiteness in the post-Civil Rights era: a move (whether conscious or not) to disaffiliate from the cultural and political spheres of "old-school" white racist identity, which in turn only serves to shore up and affirm their own comfortable inhabitations of civil society, of "rationality," of white life, of "White Being" (as you have so eloquently described it). But I guess that's what you've been saying throughout this entire interview, right? It's a constant evasion of political and "ethical" responsibilities that is systemically condoned. The problem lays with White Being as a larger, enveloping aspect of the fascist social condition we all (albeit differentially) inhabit.

Dylan: And to add to your entirely appropriate and necessary polemic against (white) liberalism—a task that i am happy you embrace so urgently given your own social and gendered racial position in the world—i have to stress that there are other layers to the violence of White Being that have *nothing to do* with the "problem of white people." There are specific ways, in this moment of compulsory diversity and institutionalized multiculturalism, where the post-apartheid United States is actually doubling down on gendered-racist state violence by fostering delimited avenues of social mobility (i.e. affirmative action and its aftermath) and ideologies of "empowerment." These are usually affixed to spectacles of dark-skinned peoples' exceptional achievements, talents, and rarified "opportunities" that work, always and incessantly, to ideologically crowd out the everyday social truths of systemic degradation and evisceration. This is just a glimpse of the mess that the ascendancy of White Being creates in its *extra-supremacist* moments, when it thrives on gestures of seduction, invitation, and inclusion that accompany the sturdy apparatuses of warfare, policing, and incarceration. A lot of us would kill (and sometimes do kill) for the chance to have "White People Problems" on a constant, uninterrupted basis, you know? That's the fatal, violent, sometimes auto-homicidal and suicidal dilemma i'm talking about.

Casey: So then, what would you suggest . . . or maybe . . . how do you envision a revolutionary politics being further proliferated in the current historical conjuncture; in terms of organization and strategy, principles and program? For instance, given the current political climate, how might a more deeply radical consciousness be fostered in the institutional and organizational spaces one inhabits? Are there useful historical approaches to oppositional intellectual work that could be revisited and revised to broaden the public discussion of political possibilities?

Dylan: I'm only capable of offering a minor, situated, fragment of a response to this question, given my own limitations of experience, position, and insight. Here's how i'll respond: the question is not whether there is some kind of activist praxis, organizing method, or cultural strategy that can incite radical-to-revolutionary possibilities in-and-of-themselves. Rather, in this particular moment, i think the question is how to create, exemplify, and experiment in rigorously scholarly, thoughtful, historically situated forms of praxis (which may or may not take a typically "activist" form). Whether people are nourished by Sylvia Rivera or Malcolm X, the Zapatistas or the Panthers, AIM or Idle No More, there are so many exemplary forms of radical work that *are also radical in their intellectual-theoretical contributions to the historical record of revolt against Civilization*. This fact should enable us to engage in our creative, experimental practices in a manner that is both humbled and deeply emboldened.

Casey: I have some questions prepared about revolutionary organization and the politics of "spontaneity" that I would like to briefly pose before we wrap this interview up. First off, what are some central themes that must be accounted for in the formation of principled "aboveground" and "underground" counter-state organizational structures? Do you see something still useful in distinguishing a relationship between the two? What must occur differently today than in past iterations of the above/below-ground split?

Dylan: This is not something i'd want to substantively write or talk about on the record, right now. What i will say is that yes, there is absolutely a need and usefulness to drawing clear practical, strategic and theoretical distinctions between legal and illicit, "responsible" and explosively contentious, aboveground and underground forms of praxis and organizing. I will say that i am in a privileged position to work in the generalized realm of aboveground, legal activities but this does not mean that i abstain from supporting, theorizing, and critiquing other kinds of political work.

Casey: What of political action that appears at first to be "spontaneous," for example, street skirmishes and larger, more organic insurrectionary mobilizations such as riots? Could you say these have a dimension of organization to them as well?

Dylan: Yes, always. Spontaneity is usually in the eye of the beholder. Shit doesn't just go down because of a random act of God, or some kind of incomprehensible magic. There is always a reason: as we know, these spontaneous irruptions are often counter-insurgency tactics employed by the state and reactionary elements who wish to provoke popular backlash against a particular community or insurgent movement; other times, people have simply had enough, and are unwilling to tolerate dying and suffering "peacefully," or "nonviolently." And if that's not a praxis of human being against White Being, i don't know what is.

Casey: Do you have any suggestions about the role of writing and public intellectual work during (and in the immediate aftermath of) rioting and other forms of open insurrectionary struggle? You know . . . these periods of heightening antagonisms that disrupt the quotidian, everyday reproduction (the so-called "peace") of white civic life. And this question doesn't only have to be directed towards instances such as Baltimore or Milwaukee recently. It could even be expanded to encompass the phase of struggle inaugurated this summer more generally (with its array of direct actions, traffic blockades, and protest mobilizations). These are periods when clarity and sober reflection on reactionary shifts in the hegemony of "law and order" are needed in the public discourse—especially if we wish counter the effects of a state and corporate media apparatus that dehumanizes insurgency and strives to appropriate grassroots revolt into dominant cultural and political blocs.

Dylan: We're talking about the radical, indispensable work of speaking and writing a historical record, and compiling a present tense archive. There are so many cultural forces and institutional forms that mitigate against this work, and which try to discipline and bully people out of their obligation to undertake this labor and art form (all narrative is art, don't get it twisted). My word of encouragement and incitement is this: while there are people who are employed or otherwise materially rewarded to do the work of writing, talking, and critical reflection, the fullest sense of the radical archive draws on the creativity endemic to the practice of *human* being against the ascendancy of White Being. This means the historical obligation to do the work—to produce the art—is far-reaching.

Casey: Who are some central thinkers that you would recommend aspiring young activists and students in the movement read and listen to today, in regards to the strategic dimensions of radical anti-racist and Black liberationist struggles?

Dylan: I suggest a deeper, collective, critical reading and discussion of those folks in the Hall of Fame: Audre Lorde, W.E.B. DuBois, Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, Angela Davis, Paolo Freire, Haunani Kay Trask, Stuart Hall, the Combahee River Collective, Toni Morrison (recall the "Seven Days" organization from Song of Solomon), Ida B. Wells, the Civil Rights Congress (We Charge Genocide, 1951), Sonia Sanchez, Vine Deloria, and so many others. The point is not merely to read and listen, it's to read and listen *actively, collectively, and in conversation with other people.*

Casey: Okay, so one last question for you Dylan. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview. Do you see any major differences that need to be accounted for in the ways that *student* activists mobilize on campuses and attempt to struggle today, as opposed to previous eras? Over the course of your work in the university, have you seen any transformations in the way students mobilize around racist policing, surveillance, and imprisonment (for better or worse)?

Dylan: The campus—whether university, junior college, high school, or some other schooling site—has played a significant role in almost every major or minor transformation of oppressive and systemically violent conditions in the history of this wretched Civilization. Students face a compounded problem in the current iteration of the neoliberal white-supremacist university/college regime, however, because they tend to be subjected to untenable financial and hence labor burdens as soon as they set foot on school grounds. So students engaged in activist work today must bear even heavier demands on their energy, and are forced to survive different and often heavier physiological stresses than their counterparts from, say, 15 years ago. (Come to think of it, maybe there is a way that students today can *politicize their burdens* and collective immiseration in a manner that doesn't rely on the grandstanding of Bernie Sanders or Hillary Clinton.) Finally, the most profound difference i have seen in recent years of student activism around criminalization, policing, and incarceration has been the circulation of the political identity "abolitionist." Far, far greater numbers of students are embracing this position, and many are doing so even when their professed political beliefs are closer to anti-racist reform (of police, laws, etc.) or progressive decarceration (of those deemed most deserving of release from prison/jail). In other words, many student activists call themselves "abolitionists" when their political agendas are fundamentally opposed to abolition! So that leaves us with the task of teaching and demonstrating what it means to inhabit the long historical *responsibilities* that accompany the declaration that one is an abolitionist. You have to be willing and able to say that shit to Sojourner Truth's ghost.

3

When the State Commits Abortion

F. Delali Kumavie

When the State performs abortions it does not do so while the fetus is in uterus, it lurks waiting until the baby is born, until the baby is cared for and loved, until It loves, until It needs hospitals and schools, till It needs futures.
The State waits until the baby is schooled, until the luminous detail of Its life is tattooed onto the motherfather, the first step, the first joyous wail, the tender feelings of love, the texture of Its hands, the lines around Its lips.

When the State performs abortions it does not hide the bloody dumbfounded placenta in dark unused alleys, it is exhibited on television, on phones, on the mechanical dictators of our everydays.
The State waits till the fetus becomes a baby, till the baby becomes a child, till the baby becomes . . . *girlboymanwomanmotherfatherworkerdaughtersisterbrothertaxpayerlessorcaregiverspender*

When the State performs abortions it does not require the latent penitent tears of mothers, fathers, sons or daughters. Its clinics are the streets; its surgical curette, the police.

When the State acts as an abortifacient it is a celebration, a festival of its silenced truths plastered in the language of equality. It is a maroon spectacle, garbed in uniforms of justice, leaving montages of subdued black bodies stitched together by the public tears of mothers.

4

Rural Niggers

John Gillespie

We live in those integrated parts of town, where the rainbow colored kids, still too young to notice any substantial difference between themselves and their playmates, run innocently across vast acres of grass, once stained with black blood. We live in those rather vacant towns, where only fifty years ago, red faces flew Confederate flags next to black bodies hanging from tree branches. And even though we no longer see the black bodies hanging, the Confederate flags still wave as a symbol of a vanguard that will undoubtedly "rise again."

We do not subscribe to the belief that black bodies are no longer persecuted by white nooses, but only that things have changed. The partiers of the black lynching parades have gotten older, and their children now walk the same hallways as us—spewing the ignorance of their parents, guarding their friendships with guns.

These indoctrinated youth, with stories from their mothers and lessons from their fathers, carry the cross of white supremacy. Sacred is the flesh of those who die to keep their whiteness; wretched is the flesh of those who damn the world with blackness.

Our lived experience of racial terror is not only conceptual. It is alive and pervasive. It's an explicit and pervasive racism that sits right next to you in Biology class. It's an explicit and pervasive racism that doesn't wish to play in your hair, but pulls it, demeans it, disgraces it. It's a racism that calls you, "Nigger," belittles you into silence, demeans you into suicide. It's a post-racial racism that imitates the racism of old. It is overt and actual, yet somehow still learns to benefit and hide behind the post-racial laws of integration, tokenized tales of black success, and the optimistic masquerade of the Obama era.

We live in those integrated parts of town, where white history teachers share white-washed messages of American glory and exceptionalism. These are the professors of the post-racial American Reich—spoon-feeding samples of the status quo, sanctifying systems of domination, transforming stories of disenfranchisement into narratives of manifest destiny.

We are the consumers of their wisdom, the students of Whitened tales, black experts on white heroism, baptized in the water of eternal repentance for white sins. And every day, we rise again, with pen and pad in hand, only to learn the Lie. The Lie that our black flesh is a social stain, the Lie that our black flesh does not matter, the Lie that the world is ours to be conquered.

We live in those integrated parts of towns, ignorant of the writers that look like us, ignorant of the genius of the men and women who look like us. We do not know we suffer from double consciousness, but we do feel this inkling to want to fit into a larger puzzle, even if one part of our self has the tendency to negate the other.

We do not know of Baldwin, but we do know that there is dungeon shaking within us, a will to scream without the ability to articulate exactly what it is we have to scream about. We have learned to turn our screams inward, to make "brilliance" antithetical to blackness, to make "ugly" synonymous with "us." We have learned to let the bass from our screams implode back atop our bodies and this is what we've learned to call "debasement."

We do not know the truth about the fire before, nor the fire next time. We only know that we are burning. And the tight-knit curls on our black heads, the plumpness of our fat lips, the "extra-bone" in our heels, and the burden of our black skin seems to be the culprit.

We live in those integrated parts of town, where the only way to know ourselves is through that denigrated art form, that ridiculed and orphaned daughter of poetry, that last drop of culture left ringing in our eardrums over radio waves signifying stories of a kind of blackness too obscure for us rural folks to comprehend. Hip-hop is our last hope at loving ourselves. If that song of somewhere, with its tales and histories of a culture so distant yet so close to our own, takes on the classification of our white classmates, as the art of the degenerate, as the poems of the soulless, as the culture of the dead, there will be no hope left for a redemption. We might say, hip-hop for the integrated is either self-discovery to the point of obsession, self-discovery to the point of awareness, or discovery of a self in self-denial.

We are the rural niggers of the integrated parts of town: learning to accept the truth that nothing can free us from their history, their plague, their flesh.

We have not rioted
so we are unheard, but we are waking up.
For when we riot, we'll cast down our bullets,
leaving buckets in the dust
One day we'll riot, and the world shall burn
at the barrel of our gun

We are the rural niggers.

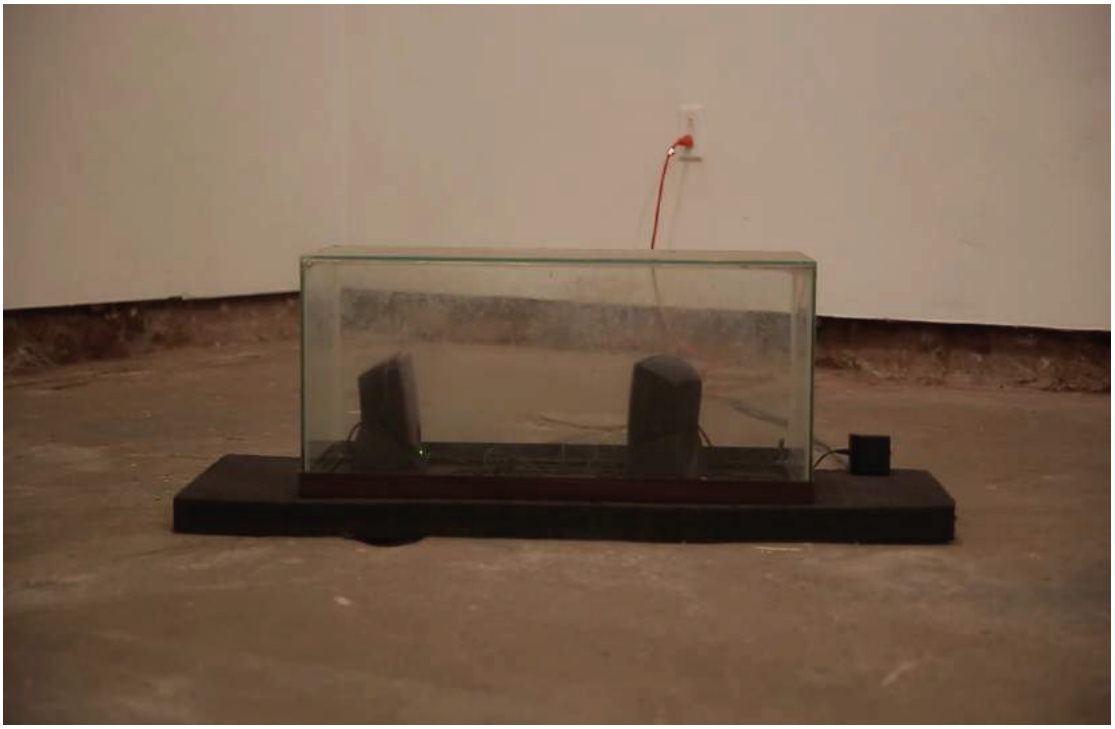
5

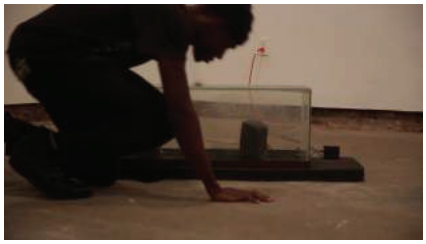
CLUBBING

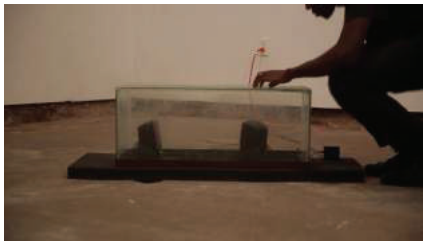
chukwumaa

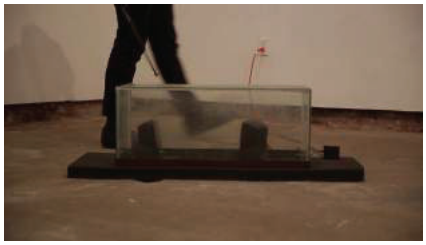
The sequence of images below are still frames taken from a video performance art piece by contributor chukwumaa, which can be viewed in full at the following link:

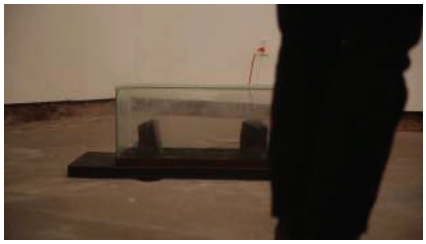
https://trueleappress.wordpress.com/2016/08/28/pnv1-chukwumaa-clubbing-video/

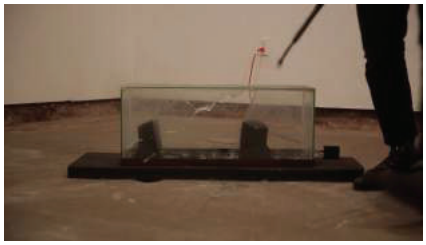


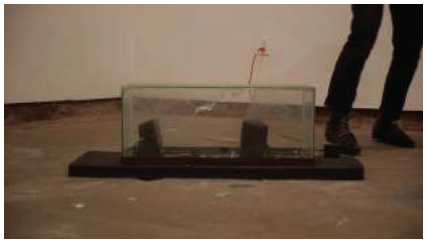


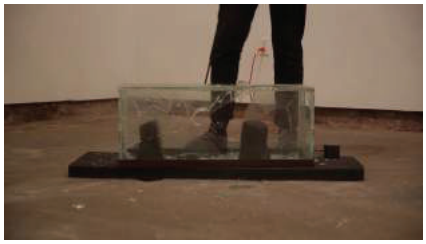


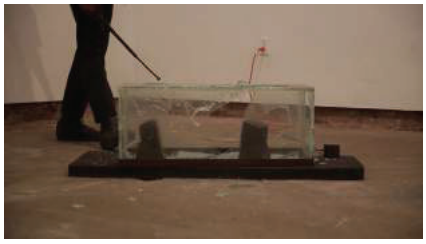


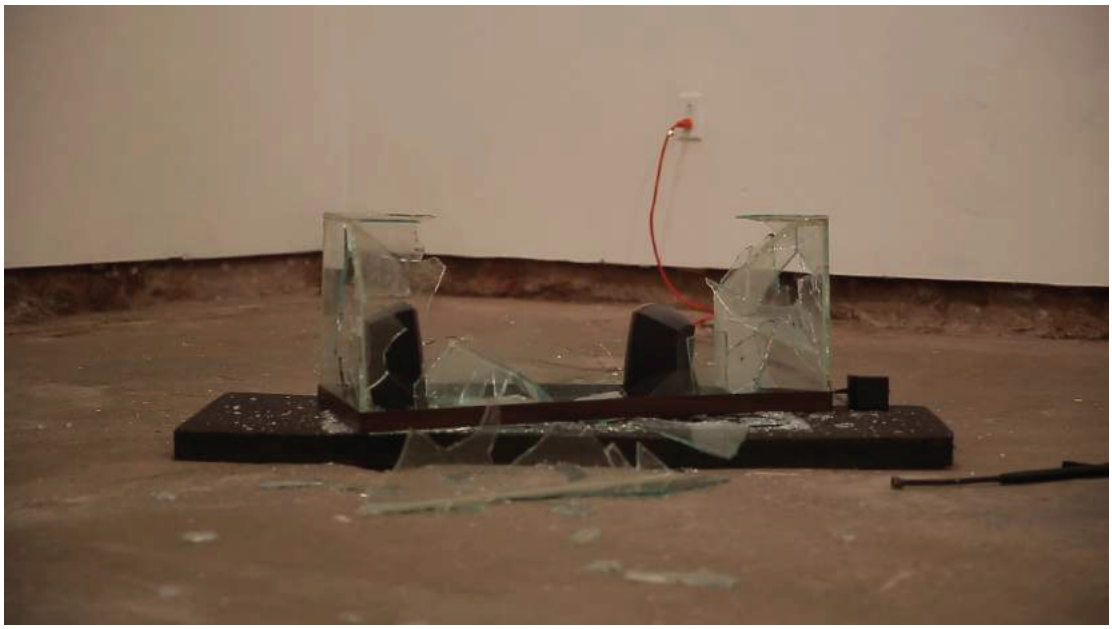












6

No Pain of Our Own

Aundrey Jones

> Ideology today is concerned only with the denial of other human beings, who alone bear the responsibility of deceit. It is then that we kill.
> —Albert Camus

I WAS AT THE BARBERSHOP when I first heard the details of Philando Castile's murder in Minnesota, the morning after learning about Alton Sterling's murder in Baton Rouge. It was a slow day, just the barber and I in the shop with no other customers. At that moment, he was the only person I had actually talked to about the murders and the demonstrations that ensued across the country. We talked as if we had known each other for years, even though this was my first haircut by him. As he continued to cut my hair, I couldn't help but to notice that our relationship had been formed through an immediate discussion of death. I had not been in the chair for ten minutes before the accumulation of dead Black bodies became the topic of conversation. It is a topic that is unquestionably far too familiar for Black Americans. It makes me believe that Blacks have acquired the ability recognize death from far away, in its many sizes and shapes. Somehow each variation of understanding death seems to meld itself into our individual life-worlds so well that we begin to build relationships with each other over it. That was certainly the case for me and my barber.

Since this day, I have found myself in many conversations reflecting on the escalating "racial turmoil." Many of these conversations were among friends and loved ones, many of whom were confused, asking "why is this happening?" and "what can I do to help?" And not out of naïveté—but out of an earnest, genuine interest. As media outlets overwhelmed me with embattled ideas concerning the police in America, I notice many people's frustrations with what they don't quite understand.

One friend asked me "why is this happening?" I couldn't help but respond, "because it was meant to."

The act of writing amidst a cloud of unsettled ashes takes its toll on me. I am overwhelmed by headaches and bad posture. I cannot even begin the task of prescribing a formula to end these recurring acts of lynching. What I can say is that this has been a remorseful year, and the summer burns with the fuel of this country's most menacing deeds. War has been waged not only on Black bodies, but Black spirits. It is not a new war. I've seen it. Black people, from ghettos and suburbs, to barbershops and beauty salons, to the classrooms and lecture halls, to the bars, churches and mosques, have all seen it. Tears flow. Curses are wished and acted upon, while fists are thrown high in the air and across jawlines. Bullets continue to pierce and brains are blown across pavement. As long as our memory recalls, to be Black in America is a terrible thing to be. Yet I think the most frightening part of it all is that whites have believed it more than we ever have.

Since the murders of Castille and Sterling, the public display of death is no longer strange to me. I have daydreams of my face, or my brother's or my sister's, being blown to pieces—my last earthy vision a policeman's sickening, devilish glare. Millions of eyes consuming an execution. *Click*—hit replay. Listen to my screams and shouts and the terrifying shrieks of passersby. *Click*––hit replay again. This time you'll watch with a certain bias, asking yourself "why did they die?" and "who gets to make that decision?" Post-vision, and half-conscious, I ponder: how does solidarity manifest itself in times like these? Does solidarity with Black Americans mean something different from solidarities between other marginalized peoples? More pointedly: what exactly *is* solidarity?

Surely the call for Black Lives to matter is one that has not been willed only by Black people. However the burden of proof seems to always rest squarely on Black backs.

I'll say it plain: Black lives matter. In fact, this system could not function without this matter. It is matter(iality) to be survielled, to be policed and disappeared. It is the raw material that white America criminalizes to produce its own collective sense of Self. And Black lives also produce intelligent matter. Black lives are funky, soulful matter. Black lives are illegible matter. Far, far too often Black lives are rendered decomposed matter. Black life is lived through the consistent, painful reconciliation with the ceaseless fact of Black death. The question of "responsibility" inevitably comes to mind in times like this. From my angle, it takes its most solemn form in the wake of the already and soon-to-be dead. It becomes imperative that Black people make known the pain suffered, and to supply the necessary means for the world to respond. This is a fact that Black Americans understand, deeply, while white Americans only appear to know. It has come to the point, where, as soon as a Black person is killed in this wretched culture of policing—I, "We," already know the

sequential process that precedes. Black people know this. We cannot help but to know it.

Increasingly I find myself curious of the ways in which non-Black peoples conceive of Black life, freedom, political movement, and culture. For as long as I have been Black, one of the resting premises of sociality is that we do what is urgent and necessary to survive, and help each other survive. Blackness bears the potential to end the world. Because of this, once Black people assert their right to survive this world, it poses an immediate threat to everyone else. I wonder about the ways that Black pain is validated only in the event that it is articulated by non-Blacks. Black rage is paired with knowledge of an exile that is unimaginable. Because of the history of enslavement, we harvest a pain that is inseparable from our being. To be Black is to be pained. To be Black is to be unknown. And to be comfortable with one's Blackness means to be comfortable with being uncharted in an anti-Black world. Black people, like anybody else, want to be heard. Yet, with the blink of an eye--or the shot of a policeman's rifle--"Brown lives matter," "Red lives matter," "White lives," "All lives."

Arriving home from the barbershop, I received a call from a friend in Italy. Numb from the news of both Philando Castille and Alton Sterling's murders, and being the only Black person in his immediate circle, he says to me: "The fuck is going on at home? God damn!" As the conversation continues, he asks, "When will it end? Shit is not supposed to be this way, man." Tearfully, not being near anyone to bear witness to and share his distress, his rage deepened. "Maybe it is supposed to be this way, and that we're just witnessing a time that really reveals the way this country feels about us," I replied, knowing that my words may not necessarily remedy his distanced pain. I made it clear to him that he has every reason to be upset, and every reason to not feel anything at the same time. This is something that I've come to reason with on numerous occasions, largely stemming from good friends of mine, all of whom identify as Black men, who have called and reached out to me during this week to have an honest discussion about the murders. Yeah, shit is bad, let's make it known to each other that we're here for each other, now let's talk about something to distract us. In essence, we would rather not feel for a moment than to try to make sense of what we actually *do* feel. We continue to ask ourselves––what does it mean for my Black life to matter? Sometimes, it is just best to not matter at all.

About three or four weeks have passed since I was assigned the task of writing this essay, which was presented to me about a week after Baton Rouge and Falcon Heights mobilized against their respective police departments. Since then we've been met with the case of Korryn Gaines, a 23-year-old Black woman from Maryland who was shot and killed at home by police, whom also shot and injured her five-year-old son in the process. Public vitriol claims that she was mentally ill and brought the situation upon herself and her son. Now reports emphasize her "negligence." They say that maybe she should not have had so many traffic run-ins with the cops; maybe she

should have appeared in court as she was "officially instructed"; maybe she shouldn't have pointed her weapon at the police. Amidst this reactionary wave of sentiment, the questions in the public discourse must be dramatically reposed. It is not what Korryn did herself to galvanize state terror, but what *sanctions* and *legitimates* homicidal police violence that must be placed under public scrutiny. Beyond the individual or fiscal imperatives the prison and policing industrial complexes, what are the societal forces animating this centuries-long war against Black life? If we are drawn to truly believe in a world without policing, the Black abolitionist strategy might be to embrace aspects of collective, and beautifully insurgent modes of Black life that already do not necessitate their presence. Black life—*that truly human life*—could guide us in this direction.

7

The Psychic Life of Blackness (Scenes of a Thinking Thing)

Marquis Bey

If philosophy, as Gilles Deleuze might say, is asking questions and from those questions deriving concepts, what happens when the most prominent question, indeed, is your right to live? What do I think if not how I come to mean and matter in the world—a world that renders me known in my entirety at a whim, throws me into an abysmal cacophony of self-un-knowing the moment I appear, all, to be clear, because of my Blackness? A sable specter, transmuting into inimicality as the sun descends and Black shadows get long: I exist, always, and hauntingly, ahead of myself.

I'VE WORN GLASSES since I was nine. Excited as all hell, as I was the only one in my immediate family sans those "nerd goggles," I rummaged through the subsequent days internally gloating about my newly acquired spectacles. The world was so much clearer now; all could be seen. Or could it? My mother has always castigated me for not keeping my glasses clean, snatching them from my face without apprisal, as she's wont to do, and mist-ifying them with her breath—*haah*—before she wiped them with the cloth of her shirt. Temporarily blinded, I lamented the twelve seconds of sightlessness, knowing that in those seconds I would never see what I could have seen.

With those glasses, I'd look, watch, see, observe—the ocular practice of learning and living. Look at the dilapidation, a condition not seen in the TV shows I watched; see the cookie-cutter gangsters, ask them about, critique, their manufactured swagger—"Nigga, whatchu holdin' ya dick for? It ain't goin' nowhere"; "You do realize that you can't whoop *everybody's* ass, right?" Ponder their minds, their shielded emotions; observe, as my mother instructed, how quickly your hand reaches for wallet, how quickly their hand reaches for gun, how quickly your voice shifts from indignation to deference, how quickly their eyes shift from "Have a nice day" to "He

looks like he's on drugs or something." These were the questions of my youth fomented by my world, ghetto-questions, those of a ferruginous Philadelphian gadfly. I'd observe, watch the world, because I had to. I'd observe, ask, inquire, *think*, because I had to. And this thinking was my refusal to be submerged by the world.

I was reared in a cauldron, bubbling with incendiary inquiries that could set the world ablaze; an enlightening darkened, and darkening, space, where brown sugar cinnamon Poptarts and orange-flavored Hi-C juiceboxes were our Communion. This was the apogee of 'hood shit.

Rene Descartes: **COGITO ERGO SUM**; *I am thinking, therefore I exist. This was so firm and sure that not even the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics could shake it.*
Claudia Rankine: Who do you think you are, saying I to me? You nothing. You nobody. You.

What might it mean if Blackness was permitted to pervade thought? What might it mean if, to put it differently, we actually started truly thinking, considering that the epistemic field is "always already touched by blackness, if not saturated by it"? Might we then heed Heidegger's words, on a different, Blacker, register: *The most thought-provoking thing in our thought-provoking time is that we are still not thinking.* That which is most thought-provoking, alas, is to think through that which we must, but too often shy away from—or kill.

Enter into the mind, which is to say the life, of Blackness, where rebels dwell, where the world simmers and smolders under the onus of its overturning. It is where turnt gets turnt up. Hit 'em up, 'cause that's where they'll be; it is where I'll be, where the wild things be at, causing adept ruckus and thought-provoking cacophony. So keep your Shakespeare, Du Bois, I sit with Maurice Sendak, giving him dap, and he urges me to make all of you wince. We'll *gather all the rebels now, we'll rabble-rouse and sing aloud.*

Albert Camus: Since we're all going to die, it's obvious that when and how don't matter. . . . One can only say that when they already, without question, matter.

But this thinking stuff can get you killed, leave you unprepared when the concrete buckles beneath your swagger and the rules you thought held steady actually don't for you. Your hotel on Boardwalk, right next to Luxury Tax; your Get Out of Jail Free card; your piles of turquoise and pink bills stuffed under the cardboard—all for naught. Your hotel can be rolled up on and handed over because, well, "property cannot own property"; your card was counterfeit and should not have been given to a

"being of an inferior order" with "no rights which the white man was bound to respect"; and your dough, naturally, was likely stolen. Think at your own risk.

Too, and sometimes even simultaneously, this thinking stuff could save your life.

Scene: When I was twelve my mother found out that my brother and I knew nothing about African American history. Or rather, it was not being taught to us. She made us research—Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, the usual suspects—and recon with her on the Black ballistic epistemological acquisitions we now possessed. It lasted only two weeks. I don't remember what I learned. I don't remember what my brother thought. I don't remember what my mother said. But I remember it happened. And that matters.

They pay me to be a scholar, which is to say, I think for a living. So why is it that, in my most strideful cogitative moments, I'm so often thinking about the possibility, the actuality, of death?

And why is it, too, that in my most strideful cogitative moments, I'm so often thinking about the possibility, the actuality, of joyous life?

Because that is all one can think when one thinks about Blackness.

***

Heidegger writes, or rather thinks, "We never come to thoughts. They come to us." I read this and was struck. What thoughts will come to me next and, when they come, will they be my own?

I wrote in the margins next to Heidegger's quote, "You got that right, Marty. And sometimes with a murderous vengeance."

Amid the death of so many, we should also celebrate the miracle of life.
*. . . We do already. What can be more celebratory than nurturing, loving, living that which was deemed dead, non-life—***PARTUS SEQUITUR VENTREM** *of the now (though has it not always, in each moment since its Latinate inception, been of the now?)—from the jump? It is you who cannot, and will not, see that life.*

I am not who I alone wish to be, at least not entirely. Nor might such a wish be admirable, or doable. The symbiosis of identities is, after all, the very nature of identities themselves. It is the nature, we might say, of being caught between what

George Yancy has called "facticity and possibility": the fact of my existence, the materiality inscribed with meaning that I did not choose; and the potential of what I could be, what I might be—what I am un-destined to become.

But if I am not my own, what am I to call myself? What name can I claim? And if I cannot claim a name, how will I know when someone calls me outside of it? To be called out of my name, and intend for that name to speak for me, puts me out of control. I cannot grasp or anticipate the me that I will become under this other name, a name that is outside, yet potentially within, me. Calling me a name that is not mine puts me in a place that I am unfamiliar with, uproots my me-ness. That eruptive, Derridean "order of the voice" coaxes me. I want to un-listen, but can't, because the voice—the called name—compels my attention, sometimes against my will. The out-of-name-calling voice "draws us to it. The voice draws unto worlds that are not ours, calls out to us, giving us, as Heidegger says, 'food for thought.'" I then lose myself—perhaps because, in part, that place can be no place at all. I must have a name, or else I am not. But that name, having shifted through time, has not always been the best of names. That name may too soon be etched onto solid slabs of concrete, marking the decomposing body seventy-two inches in the depths of the earth.

Scene: When I was twenty-three I was in the gym, benchpressing as I'm wont to do, and a seventy-year-old white man approached the bench next to me.

I am in Mississippi, 1955, and I may have been stolen that evening, found in the Tallahatchie with a gin fan around my neck, just for brushing his arm after finishing my set.

I time travel about once a day. And that takes its toll.

We have been dreaming, always dreaming, of the moment when the epidermis signaling our criminality will no longer hold its licentious cache. What happens to a dream preferred, those *somnium*-induced imaginations that choke the cogitative throat of one's gaze, one's livelihood, one's template for this thing we move through called the world?

But it is from the dream that "I" begin, and not from my own, though concerning me; it is, in another sense, from the fictive—the *real* imaginary lurking just beneath the loosening film of the grit of the real, if we can still, by the end of this, call it that—that I begin and end. And in beginning, and ending, from here I walk with ambulatory thoughts of the declining state of my sanity, with hands festering with bloodless trepidation. I exist, at least in part, as a fiction crafted by those who need me to be their lifeline, and my own deathline. The dream is a treacherous place,

as it contorts me into a grotesque facsimile of myself, passing as me, and wreaking havoc in my name. If only I, too, was cast in a divine image, justified in condemning those who shalt not use my name in vain.

But, as they continue to tell us, we are "no angels."

***

The unnamed protagonist in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man accidentally bumped into a blonde-haired, blued-eyed man one night, after which the man called him an insulting name. The protagonist, unnamed as he was, pounced on this man, kicking him. What name was he called? What name was his unname supplanted with, and into what world-that-would-have-been-no-world-at-all was he thrown? The eruptive "order of the voice." But the blonde-haired man, pervicacious as he was, refused to apologize. But, "it occurred to me that the man had not seen me, actually; that he, as far as he knew, was in the midst of a walking nightmare!" the protagonist realizes. When spectral "thug nigga" Caspers attack.

This is simply to say that, though I may indeed be no "spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms" but rather *one of flesh*, your belief in ghosts, in the paranormal (beyond, beside, or adjacent to the normal) concerns me too; if only in the sense that *your* ghosts, which is to say your imagination, your fictive reality, can possess me. And like the good ghost-believer you are, you will try to exorcise me. Your ghosts become mine, or further still, your ghosts become me. Now I don't have to believe in ghosts in order to be one.

We exist, which is to say, etymologically (and existentially), that we stand out, by virtue of occupying the precarious situation of "having been given over from the start."

But surely I am exaggerating, or *over*exaggerating, as they say, though that is redundant. "This man simply wants an audience to listen to him moan about his woes, his contrived slights that matter to no one this side of remotely normal," they say. "His hyperbolic rhetoric is a trap—*double trap, triple trap; everywhere we go, we are trapped!*" But, I plead, it is merely due to curiosity and a will to know, a will to live. It is due to a desire to see what happens when I am not the only one, it seems, shadowboxing with ghosts.

***

Where can I reside safely if not for in my own mind? I muse as I frolic through my cerebellum, shuttling through the world at accelerated paces, seeing the world, like you and unlike you. I see, but you don't see me seeing. When my travels are invisible to you, nonexistent to you, the knowledge gleaned from those excursions appears forged, invalid, ersatz. So you inhabit me with ghosts.

Nevertheless, fair or not, I'm getting my ass kicked and being blamed for starting the fight. But who else can provide an evidentiary glimpse into what occurs if not me, the one who shows up and takes the beating from nothingness? I want to hide, clothe myself in childish innocence and jump over puddles, getting my hands dirty in mud while squeezing out the last seconds of playtime before the streetlights come on. Giggle at the mundane, see newness in things centuries-old, and rest easy in a self that is mine only. I whisper to the winds and they whisper back, echo my secrets, all ours, no one else's. And now hiding is over, whispers come only from ghosts that infiltrate your you and masquerade as you. Unevictable and unwanted, but co-signers of your life. My dreams are no longer mine, but yours. I do not believe in ghosts, and neither do you. But you do. So I must too, because your ghosts have made a nest in me. They sleep soundly and I hear them snore.

Scene: After I turned eleven my father told me that he had been shot three times. And I hoped that bullets weren't hereditary. Because too often they are.

"i sometimes wonder how i get away with living while black," Evie Shockley wrote.

Me too, Evie…

8

And Once Declared Dead

Mandisa Haarhoff

and once declared dead,

among carcass our humanity lies
disposable flesh reaching (at) being,
denied

for rights and inclusion
we take breath— delusion

mark black bodies, whose foreign tongues once said, "here brother, your home is mine,"
things to be despised

exiled home—we've become witch hunters deporting
we lament our state with the desperate on a stake
failing to decry this masquerade
we got the vote
but who claims this space
we the deceased wield pangas at ease
and set tires aflame
with blood we clear the streets hoping,

perhaps, we might finally live

while sitting at negotiation
we forgot to remember,
that darkness is yet to become the liberation of the black

9

Devouring the Flesh: Notes Toward an Analytics of Seeing

Tyrone S. Palmer

The dead body is one thing; the dead black body another.
—Lindon Barrett

I.

Black death is the World's condition of possibility.

The wanton slaughter of Black people is a central thematic of modernity.

This should not be shocking. This is not news.

And yet it is.

And yet it is.

II.

One would be hard pressed to find a time or place in the history of western Civilization wherein the people called "Black" have not been subjected to gratuitous violence; a violence beyond the bounds of reason, yet central to the post-Enlightenment project of Reason; a violence, in many ways, beyond violence. Today we find ourselves perpetually mired in images of Black death, while insisting on the matter of Black life. To be sure, the current proliferation of such images is not novel (it exists within a visual-cultural context saturated with scourged backs, lynching postcards, and other morbid souvenirs), but its omnipresence in the field of vision undoubtedly is. Every advance in visual technology eventually seems to render visible a simultaneous shift in the tactics of anti-Black terror; however, unique to our current predicament, is the near impossibility of avoiding images of Black flesh bleeding, Black flesh torn apart, bullet-ridden, falling, lifeless, dying.

These videos and images serve a crucial (one might even say *ineffable*) function. As Claudia Rankine reminds us, the mediated image of the dead and dying Black body often serves as "a spectacle for white pornography: the dead body as an object that satisfies an illicit desire."[1] Following this point, I would like to briefly consider the historical and material relationships between current forms of digital video technology and anti-Black violence. It is particularly clear that the current structure of digital technologies and its mechanisms of circulation (i.e. "virality," "meme-ification," and so on) position Black death as an inescapable spectacle. This inescapable spectacle fulfills a psychic need in this sadistic, white-supremacist culture: the abject, dying Black body as a cipher and symbolic counterpoint to white life, and the locus of a peculiar industry of its own.

Over the past several years, proliferating images of Black death have become uniquely commodified, taking on a distinct fetish character. Rather than serving as evidence of wrongdoing, something worthy of more than performative "moral outrage," such omnipresent video footage serves to reify the synonymy of Blackness and death in the dominant cultural imaginary. Blackness comes to *signify* death, mystifying an entire social configuration and political-economic apparatus already sustained (both literally and figuratively) through gratuitous anti-Black violence. It is imperative we theorize the various (material, discursive, and affective) economies in which images of Black death circulate and the particularity of this circulation in our "hyper-mediated" historical present. We need to develop a different *analytics of seeing*—an alternative hermeneutic method for studying the political economy of spectacularized Black death.

III.

Value, therefore, does not have its description
branded on its forehead; it rather transforms
every product of labor into a social hieroglyphic.
—Karl Marx

These undecipherable markings on the captive body
render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose
severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the
cultural seeing by skin color.
—Hortense Spillers

The Black is the apogee of the commodity . . . .
the point—in time as well as in space—at which
the commodity becomes flesh.
—Anthony Farley

IV.

The problem of Black death is a problem of the flesh.

Literary and cultural theorist Hortense Spillers proffers an analytics of the flesh, arguing that the transatlantic slave trade marked a theft of the African body generative of the dimorphic gendered categories of modernity (i.e. woman/man, mother/father, nature/culture), while registering the captive Black in an ontological position outside of and in the interstices between such categories. This theft of the body, and the abject violence to which the captive was subjected, reduced the body to "flesh"—the base level of existence; an existence *in the raw*; that "zero degree of social conceptualization."[2] Reduced to flesh, the captive African was subject to a peculiarly singular form of commodification: the transubstantiation of personality into property, an incipient being-for-the-captor imbued with "destructive sensuality." Black flesh stood as a "prime commodity of exchange" as well as the object upon which white desire cathected.

The violent rending of Being from African personality, the creation of Black flesh, is *an originary terror endlessly repeated*. This abject violence radically alters the very materiality of the captive body. To quote Spillers at length:

> The anatomical specifications of rupture, of altered human tissue, take on the objective description of laboratory prose—eyes beaten out, arms, backs, skulls branded, a left jaw, a right ankle, punctured; teeth missing, as the calculated work of iron, whips, chains, knives, the canine patrol, the bullet. These undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color. We might well ask if this phenomenon of making and branding actually 'transfers' from one generation to another, finding is various symbolic substitutions in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments?[3]

Revisiting Spillers this time, we are reminded of Marx's theorization of the commodity fetish. In Capital: Vol. I, Marx develops a theory of the commodity that hinges on its peculiar quality and "mysterious" character. This quality—what Marx terms the fetish character of the commodity—is affixed to the product of human labor as it is turned into a commodity-form. The commodity's exchange value imbues it with a fantastic, mystical quality divorced from its use-value and actual material existence.

> Commodities are social hieroglyphs [that] require specialized interpretation for their social meaning to become apparent. Commodities are hieroglyphs *because* of their peculiar fetish character.[4]

> The commodification of race produces (a racialized) commodity fetish, which foregrounds the use-value of the racial commodity: race acquires a metaphysical status . . . consequently it is not seen as historically formed and reproduced in the labor and ideological practices of capitalist social relations.[5]

Akin to the processes through which the fetishism of the commodity mystifies the extraction of labor power, the absorption of surplus-value, and the exploitative relations that produce it—turning it into a "social hieroglyph"—the structure of cultural fictions that define Blackness in the dominant imaginary obscures the wounds and gashes which produce Black flesh. This is what Spillers terms the *hieroglyphics of the flesh*: the fatal disjuncture between the look of Blackness (the generalized and innumerable meanings and metaphors attached to Black skin) and the violent markings that produce Blackened beings. Such violence is "hidden to the cultural seeing," as Spillers puts, and a primary aspect of its commodification. The rabid consumption of images of Black death—*the unsated appetite for more*—obscures the facticity of Black death and anti-Black violence. What do we see when we see a dead Black body?

V.

The Black body is open for the looking.

The looking precludes a deeper seeing.

We are rendered captive by the looking.

"Look, a Negro!"

In the initial moments of colonial contact, the shock of Black skin produces a blinded mode of looking.

On the minstrel stage, the shine of Blackened skin
clouds vision.

Look, a Negro . . .

bleeding.

dying.

The looking prevents a deeper seeing.

We are rendered captive by the looking.

VI.

I am watching a CNN video forensics expert dissect (the footage of) Walter Scott (dying).

I am thinking of *devouring*.

David Marriot notes that in the context of lynching the photographic gaze was a central part of the ritual: "this *appetite* for document, this devouring by the eye—as if only a camera can bring the spectator close enough for the eye to be embedded in flesh."[6]

Devoration is a destructive consumption.

"A devouring scopophilia. Take it in so that you can control it, torment it, spit it out. But the image will leave its trace."[7]

To look is to devour.

ENDNOTES:

1. Claudia Rankine. "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning." New York Times, June 22, 2015.
2. Hortense J. Spillers. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." In Black, White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003: 206.
3. Ibid, 207.
4. Peter Osbourne. How to Read Marx. New York: W&W Norton, 2005.
5. Robert Young. Signs of Race in Post-Structuralism: Toward a Transformative Theory of Race. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009.
6. David Marriott. On Black Men. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000: 10.
7. Ibid, 28.

10

Memories of Blood.
To Brother(hood) Dance and all Black Movers.

Mlondi Zondi

How do we who are doing work in black studies tend to, care for, comfort, and defend the dead, the dying, and those living lives consigned, in aftermath of legal chattel slavery, to death that is always imminent and immanent?
—Christina Sharpe

Just imagine what might be possible if, instead of rushing to the new, we tended toward blackness—in all of its sensuous and imperceptible unfolding—that phantom site whose traces everywhere mark the construction of the material world and provide a different horizon from which to take our bearings.
—Huey Copeland

Dance, when you're broken open. Dance, if you've torn the bandage off. Dance in the middle of the fighting. Dance in your blood. Dance when you're perfectly free.
—Rumi

During my two years in Chicago, I have attended important and thought-provoking choreographic offerings by black companies and artists such as Dance Theater of Harlem, Darrell Jones, J'Sun Howard, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Nora Chipaumire, Baraka de Soleil, Kyle Abraham, Okwui Okpokwasili, Rennie Harris, and Urban Bush Women. The July 2016 performance and workshop by New York based duo Brother(hood) Dance at Dochester Art + Housing Collaborative certainly added to the richness already implanted by the innovators mentioned above. My attendance at this event provoked the following questions for me: What does it mean to care about black dance in the contemporary moment? Which modes of sensing the world do black choreographers make available to us through witnessing their work? How does black dance as a critical posture intend to move us, touch us, (dis)orient us, throw our assumptions into crisis, attend to the dead, reveal to us our complicities,

and help us to seriously consider whether this is the kind of world worth saving? The performance of an excerpt from Black Jones by Brother(hood) Dance provided a number of ways to think about blackness. The thoughts I offer here zero in on those aspects of the piece that provoke questions about blackness and nothingness through the visual, the sonic, and the kinesthetic.[1]

The Workshop

When I arrive at the Dochester Art + Housing Collaborative studio I am pleasantly surprised that the two Brother(hood) Dance visionaries Ricarrdo Valentine and Orlando Zane Hunter, Jr. are holding a workshop before showing a segment of Black Jones. I sit unobtrusively on the floor and observe, since I am not dressed appropriately to participate. The workshop comprises mostly of across-the-floor exercises. Participants wave and wade fluidly across the wooden floor, embodying various characteristics associated with Yorùbá Orishas Oshun and Ogun. Valentine and Hunter integrate these Orishas seamlessly into the workshop and they rigorously provide context to the participants comprising of a range of age groups. The workshop is conceptualized for anyone who is curious about the type of knowledge that this kin-aesthetic experience generates. Participants are expected to take direction without necessarily towing the line. The formal elements and the pedagogical tools they deploy produce a mode of practice that is not rooted in creating a venomous and destructive environment typical of a number of dance classes. Hunter and Valentine both labor tirelessly to refrain from foregrounding hierarchies of beauty as well as perverse sensibilities of taste, which *a priori* banish all variations of "the black body" from occupying any dance space. The pedagogical technique they employ is not venomous because it does not exclusively attend to the svelte, able-bodied, long-limbed, "proper" dancing body whose gender comportment fits their biological sex. Their attitude toward the line of the body is ambivalent, with no emphasis on a fixed straight line that is desirable in Eurocentric classical forms. Improvisations, drifts, curvations, inversions, undulations, and cessations inform the mode of operation in the workshop. It is phenomenal to witness such a movement that takes care of its participants, especially black participants. This is keeping with a longstanding practice that art historian Huey Copeland calls "tending-toward-blackness"—a "leaning into" and "caring for," that "animates a range of artistic, social, political, and theoretical practices aimed at establishing an ethical posture toward black subjects and those related forms of being that have been positioned at the margins of thought and perception yet are necessarily co-constitutive of them."[2] This movement does not make unfair and impossible demands on the dancer to fit into

desired standards of taste in contemporary and classical dance. The instructors assume an ethical posture that does not impose colonialism's racialized and gendered markers that privilege uprightness. Taking care of participants is important, since the dance studio for most of my own training has been a site of unspeakable violence: a space that expedites the destruction of black self-esteem and self-worth. This violence is unspeakable because most of the time it does not manifest itself in legible ways that lend themselves to linguistic description. This type of violence is often *felt*— as a nauseating lump in one's throat, as a sudden rush of blood to the head, and an abrupt contraction of the muscles. The dance studio is a space where hundreds of years of phobias and fantasies about black anatomy entangle and flourish. It is a scene of jealousy where black flesh is molded, straightened out, pronged, tucked, devoured, and belched out (with "good intentions"). For these reasons, I usually do not approach dance spaces as "safe spaces."

Memories of Blood

Alvin Ailey, inspired by Martha Graham, drew on his *blood memories* to create dances such as his magnum opus Revelations. Creating from blood memories, from a black standpoint, means piecing together fragments of personal experiences that make up the fact of blackness. It is similar to what thirteenth century Persian poet Rumi means when he says "dance in your blood." The "hood" in parentheses in Brother(hood) Dance has to do with centralizing narratives and personal experiences from the "hood" through active experimentation with form and narrative strategies, rather than clinging to biography and presenting oneself as an ethnographic curiosity. A poignant strategy employed by Brother(hood) Dance is avoiding narrative closure. I believe the main reason the piece is able to "stay in the hold despite fantasies of flight"[3] is precisely because they only present an excerpt of a larger piece, with no beginning and no ending. Its unwholeness provided a dizzy narrative arc that isn't projected at a final resolution of conflict. Even if equilibrium and conflict resolution are part of their choreographic vision, I argue that the excerpt as a (sub)genre destabilizes that end-goal. It is in the excerpt (and not the whole) that I find revolutionary potential, at least as it relates to form.

Blood memory work is a challenge for black artists, since making dance about what it means to be black is often received as either passé or an obsession with race. Black artists who attend to these questions in their work are often shunned in order to clear the ground for story ballets, So You Think You Can Dance, Abby Lee Miller of Dance Moms and other such great American buffoons. Those black dancers creating work

about blackness also suffer reviews and "critical" analyses that either mute their technical innovations completely to focus on issues of identity or (in an "anti-essentialist" effort) relegate their innovations to experimental dance traditions in a way that distances the artists from their blackness. Brother(hood) Dance creates dances about police brutality, black spirituality, and black masculinity in this harsh cultural climate. In Black Jones, they present vignettes of the ballroom culture in New York as well as draw from a devastatingly large archive of police brutality towards black people. These moments also challenge us to expand our definition of violence and consider violence that seems small and trivial. Police brutality is not the beginning and end of anti-black violence. Violence is sometimes disguised with politeness and good intentions, and it does not always feel bad. We aim to gain clarity by taking into account violence as also metaphysical, and really sit with that idea.[4] A nuanced assessment of violence also means attending to the intramural, interrogating those who are black but "appropriate" and valorize anti-black methods of policing other black people, especially those with dissenting voices that do not strive to make white people feel safe. The intramural strangulation of those black throats that dare to emit an insurgent sound—one that is not a plea for assimilation and rainbow coalitions— is pernicious, violent, and sadly commonplace. This agenda operates to make black artists tow the line, and it is done under the guise of a range of *selling* points such as "hope," "reconciliation," "joy," and other pious narratives of "overcoming."

"I AM A MAN"

What does it mean to see dark skinned black men on stage and how does this register in our field of vision? What are our expectations and yearnings when we see dark skinned performers, since our practices of viewing are a site where desire and genocide become intimate bedfellows? David Marriott in On Black Men directs our attention to the interrelation between looking and devouring, what he calls "eating through the eyes." He describes these cravings to consume blackness through the eyes as "appetites that disfigure us . . . look[ing] in the name of appreciating and destroying, loving and hating."[5] Operating in an industry that is hostile to dark skin, it is commendable that Brother(hood) Dance then departs from what South African poet Lesego Rampokoleng calls "sweaty flesh," which Andries Oliphant summarizes as "obsequies, self-demeaning kitsch, drum beating, ethnic prancing and the vulgar display of half-naked bodies to titillate. . . reducing the black world to sweaty flesh."[6] Brother(hood) Dance drifts away from presenting us with convivial flesh gyrating happily to appeal to the highest bidder, with mouths wide open while *shuffering and*

shmiling. Of course, this does not mean that they are not or will not be read through the disfiguring gaze which only notices skin and imposes thin-layered meanings upon it.

The innovative partnering sequences in Black Jones allow us to confront *what it means for black men to touch one another and be seen touching,* [It was Joseph Beam who first pronounced that "Black men loving black men is the revolutionary act."] Some of the moments of touch signal a love that's not permitted in modernity's gender policing logic. This kind of touch persists, however, in Black Jones. It is a delicate touch, sometimes with firm grasps and lifts that take care not to drop the other Brother. Is the touch an indication of love as revolutionary in and of itself? How do we avoid being seduced and lulled to slumber by the gentleness and warmth of the caress? How do we hold back from over-valorizing the space of touch as a safe space? The world writ large, and the dance world in particular, is not a safe space for black people. Hunter and Valentine improvise and fashion something akin to a "safe space" precisely because the dance world is *not* safe for us. Protecting the "safe spaces" we continue to build is also difficult as these spaces are sometimes infiltrated by those we are saving ourselves from. We build and ensure that our touch is not a destructive one that facilitates more damage to the dead.

There is a moment in the piece where Hunter holds a cardboard sign with the writing "I AM A MAN". There is a diagonal strikethrough with red ink on that writing which suggests that one who holds the sign is either not a man, refuses to be a man, or has never been allowed to be a man. The sign reminds us of the 1968 sanitation strike in Memphis, Tennessee, where workers—surveilled by armed police—carried and wore signs that read "I AM A MAN".[7] The statement "I AM A MAN" opens up an array of interpretations. First, it can be read as a speech act that *affirms*, rather than merely describe, one as truly a man. Second, it can be interpreted as an (un)intentional call for recognition and incorporation into the destructive yet seemingly attractive and rewarding category of "Man."[8] Whatever conclusion one arrives at, the citational element of the sign clearly indicates a continuous pattern here. The fact that the speech act is still relevant for Hunter and Valentine in 2016 to affirm black existence confirms an historical stillness, not only stillness in the form of the police halting black movement with bullets, but a more sustained stillness and foreclosure which has ensured the squashing of black progress in any direction for hundreds of years. It reveals the vices of "American democracy" that stand still and balance *en pointe* on black people's throats.

On *Feeling Good*

The post-performance discussion at Dochester Art + Housing Collaborative involves going around a circle and sharing what we all felt and thought. It is also a way to pose questions about Black Jones. The audience-participants each pose sophisticated questions about touch, visuality, personhood, citizenship, and freedom. One of the points that linger is about being touched and or moved emotionally by the dance. It is indisputable that participating in and watching dance can be an extremely entertaining and healing process. Feeling good is great—and necessary in these ever-cataclysmic times—but we must also recognize that just "feeling good" is not and cannot be the totality of our set of revolutionary principles. It is incumbent upon us to reconsider how we have been cathedralizing good feelings and conflating them with freedom. It is too hasty and irresponsible to shout "we feel good, therefore we have arrived at our destiny, freedom is hither!" I find it irresponsible to conceptualize and accept our freedom as a future utopia we cannot yet touch or a kind of "waiting for the glory of the coming of the Lord." I find this to be a cruel, uncritical, and premature celebration of the figment that is paradise. What are we left to do with a world that cannot and will not usher in our freedom, because its existence is contingent on the premise that we remain the antithesis of the Human? Martinician poet Aimé Césaire in Notebook of A Return to My Native Land advises us: "The only thing in the world worth starting: the end of the world, for heaven's sake."[9] In this sense, we end the world of our "death-bound subjectivity"[10] by any means necessary.

Individual performances and embodied experiences allow us come up with our own individual definitions of freedom. What feels nice and what releases endorphins might drive an individual to make claims about being free. However, these valid and fleeting feelings do not unniggerize the individual performer who is *positioned* and operates as part of a collection of nothingness**.** This nothingness entails being (mis)seen, perceived, and treated like a void whose flesh can be severed at a whim by those who are not black because—through racist perception—black flesh is devoid of personhood.[11] Black individuals with *class* privilege cannot escape how this mode of perception affects them, because it is an attack on blackness as *a collective category of non-Being*. The stage where black performers enact and intensely feel their freedom and pleasure is also a danger zone. This is why Saidiya Hartman calls upon us to seriously confront the question of black performance as always happening within the context of coercion.[12] I am not prepared to refer to the state we're in as freedom. We cannot truly claim to be free when we are still fixed as a collection of nothingness, despite some of our individual convictions that we (are) matter. It is crucial that as black art-makers we attend to our suffering not as "inferior social subjects," as

Hortense Spillers advises in her essay "Interstices," but from what she calls the "paradox of non-being" where under "the sign of [a] particular historical order black female and male are absolutely equal."[13] Selamawit Terrefe, a careful and unflinching reader of Spillers puts this succinctly: "While the foci of violence against Blacks of all presumed genders may appear to have differential modes or loci (according to where they are positioned along a lateral hegemonic axis of white, heteronormative patriarchy), unrestrained violence positions all Blacks, regardless of their various gendered subjectivities, along a vertical axis driven and perpetuated by antiblackness."[14] Anti-blackness stitches *all* black life to death, those who are presumed to be female and those who are presumed to be male (and I urgently propose a radical departure from reducing black ~~gender~~ to this bifurcation). This is why black artists, even those who understand themselves as "queer" need to pause and think twice before appropriating a common grammar of "queerness" to explain both their suffering and freedom. We can't purport to be free when we still signify *nothingness in the flesh*. Freedom is not enduring a "fatal way of being alive"[15] while waiting for your flesh to be whimsically executed. Our mourning cannot be reduced to catharsis. Our mourning cannot halt at "getting over it." Our movement cannot be restricted to a choreographic score of "moving on." What we leave behind when we "move on" matters because it never leaves us. Our mo(u)rning is not possible here!

Aporetic endings, To Brother(hood) Dance

Thank you for a *choreopoetics of aporia*—a series of vignettes that avoided narrative closure even if we might have felt it was best for us.[16] Black Jones offers catharsis not as an end goal, but as a map and not the destination. The workshop established a practice of "tending-toward-blackness" while the Black Jones performance excerpt presented the transient nature of our feelings of freedom. This approach reveals to us love as a pleasurable danger zone. Thank you for not being seduced and thus seducing us in with a messianic moralization and sanitation of the black struggle. The black struggle cannot be reduced to nice feelings and moral outcomes. Dissenting black voices and actions cannot be reduced to fatalism and self-pity. Moments in Black Jones truly came close to Terrefe's description of black performance as a catachrestic term for runaway slaves.[17]

ENDNOTES:

1. This mode of inquiry is made possible by my engagement with the work of black thinkers such as (but not limited to) Christina Sharpe, Athi Mongezeleli Joja, Selamawit Terrefe, Jared Sexton, Hortense Spillers, David Marriott, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, Patrice Douglass, Frank Wilderson III, Saidiya Hartman, Cecilio Cooper, Nicholas Brady, Andile Mngxitama, Mayfield Brooks, John Murillo III, Abdul R. JanMohamed, Huey Copeland II, Andile Mngxitama, Jaye Austin Williams, Tyrone Palmer, Joy James, Frantz Fanon, and Orlando Patterson.
2. Huey Copeland. "Tending-toward-Blackness." October 156 (2016): 141-44.
3. Frank B. Wilderson. Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms. Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2010.
4. For a full discussion on metaphysical violence see: Patrice Douglass and Frank B. Wilderson. "The Violence of Presence: Metaphysics in a Blackened World." The Black Scholar 43:4 (2013): 117.
5. David Marriott. On Black Men. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000: 27
6. Andries Oliphant. "A big Step, Abject bile and revolt in the work of Lesego Rampokoleng." In Positions: Contemporary Artists in South Africa, edited by Peter Anders and Matthew Krouse. Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2010.
7. Of course, this statement must be read alongside Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman" (1851). For more information on the 1968 sanitation strike in Memphis see the following URL: http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_memphis_sanitation_workers_strike_1968/
8. For a thorough critique of the category of Man, see: Sylvia Wynter. "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of *Désêtre*: Black Studies Toward the Human Project." In Not Only The Master's Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice, edited by Lewis R. Gordon and Jane A. Gordon. Boulder: Paradigm, 2006: 107-69. Also see Wynter's "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Toward the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument." CR: The New Centennial Review 3:3 (2003): 257-337.
9. Aimé Césaire. Notebook of a Return to My Native Land. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1995.
10. Abdul R. JanMohamed. The Death-bound-subject : Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death. Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2005.
11. Hortense J. Spillers. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." In Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. Also see Frantz Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks. London: Pluto, 1986.
12. Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson. "The Position of the Unthought" Qui Parle 13:2 (2003): 183-201.
13. Hortense J. Spillers. "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words." In Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.
14. Selamawit Terrefe. "Phantasmagoria; or, The World is a Haunted Plantation." In The Feminist Wire. Posted October 10, 2012. The article is accessible at the following URL: http://www.thefeministwire.com/2012/10/phantasmagoria/
15. Marriott (2000).
16. To conceptualize a "choreopoetics of aporia," I borrow from Wilderson's work in "Social Death and Narrative Aporia in *12 Years a Slave*." Black Camera 7:1(2015): 134-149.
17. Terrefe (2012).

11

Untitled

mayfield brooks

Dancers know
how to die, lay
prostrate before
the moon's light.

Dancers know
the language
of flowers and ships
matrilineal winds
gusts of snow
falling leaves.

Seasons of death
reincarnated
into interrupted
landscapes.

Oceans between us.

Who said this language
of signs would be easy to understand?

Who said anything?
An echo sedates
imagination.

Lost leg
broken knee
severed neck.

Rescue the body that
nobody loves.

* dedicated to black lives matter
and those that don't

12

On the Courtesies of Order

Casey Goonan

> The courtesies of order, of ruly forms pursued from a heart of rage or terror or grief defame the truth of every human crisis. And that, indeed, is the plan: To defuse and to deform the motivating truth of critical human response to pain.
> —June Jordan

At stake in this essay is the possibility of generating a deeper historical understanding of the alliances that solidify between liberal antiracist reformers and the white-supremacist authoritarian state during periods of domestic upheaval and counter-state political struggle. Following poet June Jordan's prophetic wisdom, the ensuing argument places emphasis on the processes by which the courtesies of liberal order—that is, (white) civil society's foundational principles of "peace," "legality," and "civility"—compose a matrix of racist disciplinary power that I dub *reformist policing*. By invoking this term, I am referencing a constellation of strategies, technologies, and motives that dynamically coerce insurgent forms of Black dissidence into white pacifist paradigms of political engagement. Initially formed in response to the groundswell of urban insurrections in the late-1960s, I uncover a key technology of the reformist policing process operating in the official scripts of Civil Rights reform: the contingent embrace of a "docile" Black subjectivity and politics embraced by liberals as an explicit containment strategy.

As a point of historiographic departure, we might look to Senator Robert N.C. Nix's condemnation of the 1965 Watts uprising as evincing the underlying economy of practices that drives this mode of counterinsurgency warfare:

> Mr. Speaker, despite the complexity of the circumstances, despite the admitted fact that all of us say there is some cause for unrest, I say there is no justification for murder, pillage, arson, robbery, assault, and general disregard for the constituted laws

> of the land . . . To blame the Negro leadership is a most interesting response. It is to impute to those leaders a power never possessed in history by the leaders of any people—the ability to control a mob . . . Mr. Speaker, *I categorically condemn the use of violence in any form. I completely reject the utter disobedience of proper public authority*. This sort of behavior bears no relation whatever to the civil rights struggle; its yield is only bitter fruit and ill will.[1]

To defame the everyday social truths forged in resistance to the white-supremacist state—to defuse and deform the structure of motives animating collective Black revolt—is a unique effect of the reformist policing process. Echoing the originary colonial distinction between the Savage and the Civilized, Senator Nix's assimilation of the "civil rights struggle" into the disciplinary strictures of "proper public authority" can be seen erecting moralistic barriers against insurrectionary dissent by fashioning the uprising as illegal, irresponsible, and "mob-like." This modernist split between the rational and irrational, citizen and criminal, docile and incendiary can be seen as resonating with the era's common liberal racial sensibilities in ways that reify and uniquely "dramatize" the state's posture as neutral arbiter of domestic racial crisis. This fabricated identity as postracial crisis mediator facilitates an array of tacit policing mechanisms, which, in turn, hinge on the (tentative) privileging of a pacifist, Black bourgeois subjectivity and praxis fashioned in diametric opposition to the criminalized figure of the Black insurrectionist.

The marching orders of more conservative elements in civil society also can be seen unfolding in the archive of the Watts uprising: "The United States is experiencing *a severe breakdown in respect for law and order* among students, among minority groups, among extreme right and left wing organizations" (Sen. Ichord); "Here we see armed thugs running rampant in the streets *burning*, *pillaging*, *and killing*" (Sen. Hansen); "A government of laws which has been the cornerstone of our Republic for nearly 200 years is being set aside or superseded" (Sen. Jordan); "The time is long past due when the President should make an unequivocal statement that *law and order will prevail, that the police departments of this nation will not be sacrificed to appease criminals*" (Sen. Martin).[2] In predictable fashion, conservatives in the days during and after the uprising were stirring the ideological conditions of possibility for a racist moral panic to blossom around the "threat" of insurrectionism and Black nationalist militancy.

One of the most revealing examples of this reactionary criminological tendency can be found in the statements of Senator Herman Talmadge White, a white Democrat from Georgia:

> Mr. President, the entire Nation is shocked and horrified by the racial rioting in the city of Los Angeles. In the wake of this holocaust, in which more than 30 lives have been lost and which still rages in some parts of the Los Angeles area, various and

> sundry so-called explanation and excuses have been offered by experts in the fields of law enforcement, sociology, psychology, psychiatry, urban affairs, and economics . . . Regardless of how learned the expert or how scholarly the presentation; I, for one, cannot comprehend how poverty, slum conditions, unemployment, cultural or economic need, or alleged discrimination—as deplorable as they are—can be justification for lawlessness and rioting. I, for one, Mr. president, have yet to be given an acceptable excuse for taking the law into one's own hands. In our country under the American system of government, there is no such excuse.[3]

Framing his call through the eyes of a horrified white national body approaching the visceral horizon of a subaltern "holocaust," Senator White's rhetoric arouses the affective structures of white "innocence" and "vulnerability" in the most direct and explicit of ways. Such statements lay bare the moral and cultural scripts informing a period that Dylan Rodríguez calls White Reconstruction.[4] Influenced by Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign in 1964, this ongoing period of racial reconstruction ushered in a populist embrace of law-and-order which framed urban insurrections and the growing presence of Black, Third World, and Indigenous liberation movements through the imagery of a defenseless white nation under siege. In this symbolic context, tropes such as "public safety" and "civic security" became touchstones through which mainstream white society could realize its collective identity in the midst of a looming Black and Brown "urban threat." It is here, at this critical juncture, that we see the most dramatic acceleration in the *contemporary* prison regime's cultural and institutional consolidation, as well as a fatal galvanization of the FBI/CIA counterintelligence apparatus.[5]

Yet we must also consider the often overlooked centrality of *liberal technologies of gendered-racial criminalization* within the institutionality of white-supremacist counterrevolution. As prison studies scholar Naomi Murakawa argues, white (and Black) liberal activists, politicians, and cultural workers during this period often interpreted Black revolt as the pathological cultural, psychological, and familial outgrowth of white "racial prejudice."[6] From this premise, any account of (counter)revolutionary processes in the United States that does not account for the presence of multiple and competing technologies of criminalization risks obscuring how authoritarian state dominion is impelled through a *white-supremacist law-and-order circuit*. Two ends bind this circuit together. While one end is comprised of reactionary elements interested in punishment and retribution, the other encompasses a shifting assemblage of liberal critics and tepid penal reformers whose political blunders inevitably sustain (if not refine, or at times *reinvent*) racially formed technologies of policing, criminalization, and incarceration from epoch to epoch. Emanating from the latter wing of the law-and-order circuit, we find an assortment of moral and political discourses indelibly marked by this pathologizing strategy of counterinsurgency.

As a point of cultural reference, we might turn to an editorial in the corporate liberal Time Magazine, published just days after the uprising. Titled "The Negro After Watts," the editorial declares:

> But more than ever, after the overriding duty of thinking of all human beings as individuals, the United States must look upon Negroes as divided into two groups: a prospering level, committed to integration and possessed of a stake in society; and a slum level, mired in deepening ignorance, immorality, and irresponsibility, and growingly enamored of a chauvinistic, equal-but-separate kind of segregation. This schizophrenia visibly affects Negro leadership. Understandable compassion for the poor leads even the most moderate leaders to play down Negro duties, play up white guilt; the extremists of Negro hatred get by unchided.[7]

Such were the parameters of an emergent postracialist idiom of anti-Black criminalization, formalized *not* by white conservatives masking racist statecraft with colorblind rhetoric, but through the ideological apparatuses of a burgeoning Establishment Left.

Returning to the archive of South Central insurgency, we can acknowledge that the white-supremacist state's self-endorsed paternal oversight and co-optation qua benevolent proctorship of the "civil rights struggle" entailed a simultaneous condemnation and patronizing elevation of the "responsible" (read: pacifist and male) Black Civil Rights activist: "Every responsible civil rights leader has recognized from the start that law was the foundation of the struggle for genuine equality in voting, education, housing, employment, and access to public accommodations . . . *It is that the rights of the Negro and every other American depend on respect for the law.* No free society can survive, much less perfect itself, without a full acceptance of the president's thesis that 'neither old wrongs nor new fears can ever justify arson or murder'" (Sen. Irwin); "In my opinion, Dr. King and other recognized leaders of this Nation's civil rights movement *are obligated to help quell these insurrections* which are the inevitable result of pyramiding violations of the law which have been occurring in scores of previous demonstrations" (Sen. Hansen).[8] Such persistent assignments of "responsibility" to the figure of the Black (male) Civil Rights Leader thread throughout the official record of the insurrection, and suggest the presence of an overwhelming desire on behalf of liberal officials to delineate "acceptable" from "unacceptable" Black politicality.

This resonates similarly to what Saidiya Hartman's describes as the replacement of the whip and chains with the "tethers of guilty conscience" following the nominal abolition of racial chattel slavery.[9] What Hartman is referencing here is the transfer of particular violent and terroristic structures of guilt, blame, and servility into the post-Emancipation era through the proliferation of liberal contractual-obligation based relationships. Albeit different epochs, the narratives on the Watts

uprising emanating from reformist blocs are marked by the strategic embrace of contractual obligation as a requisite measure for successful Black inclusion into the domain of "legitimate" politics. Only antiracist mobilizations operating within the parameters of the mainstream legal process constitute forms of political action capable of achieving successful integration. Those who participate in militant or insurrectionary forms of dissent are excluded from this tentatively privileged space.

Another prominent articulation of the reformist policing process can be recalled in the statements of white liberal Senator Jacob Javits. In the days following the uprising, he remarks:

> I speak today because perhaps the greatest injury suffered in the riots was the serious blow to the remarkable record of the civil rights movement—a record of order and nonviolence in the face of substantial, unbearable provocation—which has brought so much dignity, so much patriotism, and so much support to the movement.[10]

Again, it is the overwhelming concern for orderly and non-violent sectors of the Black movement that, in the last instance, serves to debase and criminalize undisciplined and "incorrigible" tendencies emanating from the underside of American civil society. However, behind the veil of his postracist patriotic cantor, the liberal Senator's emphasis on "healing" Black injury carries affective freight with historical precedent. As Asma Abbas reminds us, capitalist nation-states have historically used the discourse of wounding/healing and suffering/saving to preserve their status as sovereign entities and retain their monopoly on the legitimate use of violence.[11] She further notes how state discourses predicated on the victim-subject's perspective, "whether in hearing their voices, forcing them to speak, or speaking for them," are only humored so long as it serves to complete the *savior-subject's* knowledge, its worldview, its understanding of justice. As we see in the statements of Senator Javits and his colleagues, such benevolent narrative-strategies accumulate incredible political gravity for the reformist policing process.

To be clear, I am not dismissing Black injury, suffering, or any other variable that signifies the experience of anti-Black racial, sexual, or class violence with this critique. I also am not claiming that the circumstances driving collective revolt are anything to embellish or take lightly. What I intend to do is shift analytic priority to the techniques that antiracist reformers deploy to 1.) make sense of racial subjection and 2.) define "appropriate" Black politicality, in order to frame popular conceptions of revolt on their own assumptive premises. What we see in these statements circulating in the late-1960s, then, is *not* the mobilization of a benevolent platform of "empowerment" emerging just prior to unprecedented white racist backlash, but the emergence of a complex technology of racial crisis management, which actually *spearheaded* the era's counterrevolutionary processes. Black injury, as a discursive

object, in this case, becomes an indispensible resource for a white-supremacist state in crisis.

Reformist policing should thus be conceptualized as a multifaceted appendage of authoritarian state power that commonly mobilizes through a language at times indistinguishable from the organic grammars of "resistance." What we need to be questioning in periods of crisis and upheaval are not merely the actions of reactionary elements. In the post-Civil Rights era, it is the liberal reformist policing process that consolidates state hegemony and dramatically augments the trajectory of political and cultural movement. If we recall June Jordan's words in the epigraph: to "defuse and to deform the motivating truth of critical human response to pain," is, indeed, an exclusive function of liberal antiracist reform within the institutionality of white-supremacist counterrevolution.

Published just two years after the Watts uprising, another useful case in point can be found in the widely read Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (RNACCD).[12] Setting the stage for the commission's investigation, we see an unparalleled rehearsal of white-liberal compassion toward the "Negro"-turned-"racial ghetto"-problem:

> Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal. Reaction to last summer's disorders has quickened the movement and deepened the division . . . This deepening racial division is not inevitable. The movement apart can be reversed . . . To pursue our present course will involve the continuing polarization of the American community and, ultimately, the destruction of basic democratic values. The alternative is not blind repression or capitulation to lawlessness. It is the realization of common opportunities for all within a single society . . . It is time now to turn with all the purpose at our command to the major unfinished business of this nation. It is time to adopt strategies for action that will produce quick and visible progress. It is time to make good the promises of American democracy to all citizens—urban and rural, white and black, Spanish-surname, American Indian, and every minority group.

After performing the ethically correct gesture of acknowledging white racism as the most significant factor in establishing what it terms the "racial ghetto," the commission schematically outlines a set of theories as to why Black people were in revolt:

> The culture of poverty that results from unemployment and family breakup generates a system of ruthless, exploitative relationships within the ghetto. Prostitution, dope addiction, and crime create an environmental "jungle" characterized by personal insecurity and tension. *Children growing up under such conditions are likely participants in civil disorder* . . . As a result of slavery and long periods of unemployment, the Negro family structure had become matriarchal; the males played

> a secondary and marginal family role—one which offered little compensation for their hard and unrewarding labor. Above all, segregation denied Negroes access to good jobs and the opportunity to leave the ghetto. For them, the future seemed to lead only to a dead end. (Italics added)

Throughout the first several pages of the Report, we see a perverse, criminalizing expression of liberal moral panic proliferated through the "bad faith" heralding of legible Black suffering. This hyper-representation of a pathological suffering imposed by the "ghetto environment"—an alleged precursor to "blind repression" and "lawlessness"—situates the state's paternal duty of Black uplift as the solution to the country's devolution into chaos. It is through this appropriation and redeployment of legible Black suffering that the "vital needs of the nation" become easily conflated with the "unfinished business" of extending "the promises of American democracy to all citizens." However, this conception of pathological suffering is not only appropriated by the state in the abstract. The discourse of Black pathology completely saturates the nominative properties of those bodies proliferating in revolt. Throughout the Report, the Black insurrectionist is actually written as a body *totally outerdetermined by forces beyond its own will*.

The zealous reframing of insurrectionary or "criminal" tendencies as the result of the "Negro family structure" is a clear expression of the interrelated matrices of anti-Black racism, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism.[13] Such frameworks displace the burden of an entire set of societal problems onto the Black Female vis-à-vis the assumed sanctity of the white-patriarchal family. The absent presence of the (white) heteronormative nuclear family governs the scant representations of Black women and families in the report through the rhetoric of failure, with Black women becoming the principal source of an allegedly "incorrigible" population. This brief moment of hyper-visibility for the "failed" Black Female allows for the entire regime of Black pathology to unfold.

Studied, debated, poked and prodded, the Black insurrectionist becomes the centerpiece of an entire "compassionate" regime girded by the desire to secure (white) American futurity. Foreshadowed by the alleged "failures" of the Black Female, the insurgent figure is frozen in time and space by the so-called "culture of poverty." Discursive clusters such as "long periods of unemployment," the female-headed "family structure," "prostitution," "dope addiction," "crime," "personal insecurity and tension," "ruthless, exploitative relationships in the ghetto," and above all "slavery," all appear to coalesce around the insurgent figure to signify the pathological conditions of insurrectionary resistance. What a demystified reading of the "dead end" of the culture of poverty reveals, is how the very strategies deployed by liberals to identify the "causes" of Black subjection and civic mutiny are actually the very tools rescripting Black flesh as inherently outerdetermined subjectivity. These

circulating tropes of the Black insurrectionist are thus further naturalized in the public discourse as expressions of pathological existence. The National Advisory Commission's diagnoses of the culture of Black urban space must be understood as one example, among many others, in which the reformist policing process generates novel policing technologies that *sustain* rather than ameliorate historical regimes of anti-Black violence. Our next move is to understand how such subtle maneuvers of counterinsurgency warfare are ongoing, if not amplified, in the immediate political present.

ENDNOTES:

1. 89th Congressional Record 1st sess. (1965): Sen. Nix. No. 150, A4627, my italics.
2. Ibid, Sen. Ichord. No. 150, 19986; Sen. Hansen. No. 150, 8; Sen. Jordan. No. 150, 20407; Martin. No. 150, A4627, italics added.
3. Ibid, Sen. White. No. 150, 19760.
4. Dylan Rodrígíuez. Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the US Prison Regime. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. Also see "Goldwater's Left Hand: Post-raciality and the Roots of the Post-Racial Racist State." Cultural Dynamics 26:1 (2014).
5. Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall. Agents of Repression: the FBI's Secret War against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement. Boston: South End Press, 1988.
6. Naomi Murakawa. The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
7. Editorial. "The Negro After Watts" Time Magazine (August 27, 1965)
8. 89th Congressional Record 1st sess. (1965): Sen. Irwin. No. 150, A4855; Sen. Hansen. No. 150, 19758, italics added.
9. Saidiya V. Hartman. Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
10. 89th Congressional Record 1st sess. (1965): Sen. Javits. No. 150, 19842.
11. Asma Abbas. Liberalism and Human Suffering: Materialist Reflections on Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
12. Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder. New York: Bantam Books, 1968. (All italicized text in the quoted passages are added.)
13. See Angela Y. Davis's Women, Race, Class. New York: Vintage Books, 1983, as well as Hortense Spiller's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *diacritics* (1987): 65-81. For an analysis of the gendered construction of the Black insurgent see Joy James' "Framing the Panther: Assata Shakur and Black Female Agency." In Want to Start a Revolution?, edited by Dayo Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, & Komozi Woodward, 138-160. New York: New York University Press, 2009. Also see Kara Keeling's "'We'll Just Have to Get Guns and Be Men": The Cinematic Appearance of Black Revolutionary Women." In The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense, 68-94. Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2007.

13

Black Liberation and the Abolition of the Prison Industrial Complex

An Interview with Rachel Herzing

Rachel Herzing lives and works in Oakland, CA, where she fights the violence of policing and imprisonment. She is a co-founder of Critical Resistance, a national grassroots organization dedicated to abolishing the prison industrial complex and the Co-Director of the StoryTelling & Organizing Project, a community resource sharing stories of interventions to interpersonal harm that do not rely on policing, imprisonment, or traditional social services. The following interview was conducted by the True Leap Publishing Collective.

True Leap Press (TLP): Hi Rachel, thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview. We are excited to have you as a contributor in this inaugural edition of Propter Nos. Our publishing collective thinks the specific timing of this issue is important to highlight, as it is set to be released in the closing days of Black August. Could you possibly explain what Black August is for our readers, and why it is so important for people to recognize today?

Rachel: Black August is a call for reflection, study, and action to promote Black liberation. Its roots go back to California prisons in the 1970s, during a period of sustained struggle and resistance against racialized violence against Black imprisoned people, especially those calling for Black liberation and challenging state power. Ignited by the deaths of Jonathan and George Jackson in August 1970 and August 1971, and honoring others who gave their lives including Khatari Gualden, William Christmas and James McClain, a group of imprisoned people came together to develop a means of honoring that sacrifice and promoting Black liberation. While August is significant because of the deaths of the Jackson brothers, it is also a month with many other significant moments in Black history in the United States including

the formation of the Underground Railroad, Nat Turner's rebellion, the March on Washington, and the Watts uprising, to name just a few. So there was an idea that this could be a time that imprisoned people in the California prison system could use for reflection, study, and to think about how to strengthen their struggles. During the month, people wouldn't use radios or television, would fast between sun up and sun down, and practice other measures of self-discipline. Eventually the commemorations during that month were taken up outside of prisons, too. Malcolm X Grassroots Movement became the stewards of the commemoration outside prisons, although many people honor and celebrate this legacy and the roots of the practice. Black August is important to commemorate (and I hope that the variety of ways that people commemorate that legacy can be nurtured and encouraged), in part, because it connects imprisoned organizers and revolutionaries with communities outside of prisons that are struggling for similar things. It's often the case that imprisoned communities are meant to be invisible, and essentially cut off from non-imprisoned communities, especially communities of struggle. I think that is an important reason to reflect, as well as to study and honor the sacrifices Black revolutionaries have made over centuries and recommit ourselves to the struggle. Black August provides one important vehicle for doing that.

TLP: On this note, how did the contemporary prison and policing abolition movement emerge? What are some of the major theoretical and historical connections existing between abolitionism in its current iterations and these earlier articulations of the Black/Prisoner liberation struggle just mentioned?

Rachel: Well I think the periodization probably depends on who you talk to. So since you're talking to me, you're going to get something pretty specific [laughter]. I think it also depends on what you mean by "contemporary." In my mind, there is a long through line of people fighting particularly for the abolition of imprisonment that goes back to Eastern State Penitentiary, which was the first modern day US prison. That was in Philadelphia, 1829. Almost immediately, the Quakers, who played a role in building this institution to encourage reflection, understood that this was a mistake. And Quakers ever since that time have been on the frontline of advocating for the abolition of imprisonment. So there is that old-timey version of it, which links back to the development and the build up of penitentiaries as institutions of containment and human control.

If you jump ahead to the 1970s and 1980s, you begin to see organizations that are fighting for a moratorium on prison construction, but also groups advocating actively for the abolition of imprisonment. For instance, there is a book that came out during this period called Instead of Prisons, originally published in 1976, by a group called Prison Research Education Action Project (PREAP). At that time, they were

looking at a national prison population that was 250,000. They thought surely this is a tipping point, we need to take action now. And so, as we know, the imprisoned population in the US is now nearly 2.3 million. So this struggle dates back, then, to the seventies and eighties, and became somewhat quieter in certain periods, but never completely went away.

1998 is another important year: the founding Critical Resistance (CR) conference was held in Berkeley that year. That conference did some work to reinvigorate the concept of abolition, and not just as a thing to organize around intellectually, but to organize campaigns and projects around, as well. It also introduced the concept of the prison industrial complex (PIC) into a more popular consciousness. While that conference didn't form some kind of modern abolitionist movement, it did reignite an energy that may have been less prominent or less active just prior to it. That conference was still very focused on imprisonment and it wasn't until 2001, when Critical Resistance East happened that there was a really strong attention toward thinking about the abolition of the prison industrial complex as a whole. That was kind of at the forefront of what that conference was all about.

I think today, and since becoming an organization in 2001, CR plays a particular role in advocating for the abolition of the entire system—of the entire prison industrial complex—rather than just being a prison abolition organization. CR was really at the forefront in the early 2000s as an organization advocating for the abolition of policing, too. Nowadays you hear a lot more people talking about policing itself as something to fight, as opposed to resisting its function within the PIC or even just its relation to imprisonment. It is more common these days for people to think about ways to live without some idea that law enforcement is a kind of natural feature of our world.

So I think there is a through line there from early Quaker opposition to imprisonment to the contemporary movement for PIC abolition. And like all movements, there are some ebbs and flows to it, but those are some of the key markers that I would use to talk about its development.

TLP: What exactly brought you into the abolitionist movement? Do you identify as an abolitionist, or is this one aspect of a larger, overarching framework which informs your praxis?

Rachel: I think it is both. I definitely identify as a prison industrial complex abolitionist. I do that work because I believe in the liberation of Black people and I think that it is one of the foremost ways to see that broader goal fulfilled. Without the abolitionist movement and without a commitment to ending mass criminalization, containment, and death of Black people, I don't think Black liberation is possible in the United States—or elsewhere, frankly. So I come to this work as a survivor of

sexual harm and law enforcement harm who doesn't believe the PIC makes me any safer, and as somebody who is committed to the liberation of Black people.

TLP: You alluded earlier to the differences between a politics of gradualist police and prison reform and a prison-industrial-complex abolitionist praxis. What are your thoughts on framing political struggle in terms of either "abolition" or "reform"? Are there not limitations to framing the conversation in this way?

Rachel: I don't think it's very useful to position those as binaries. I think it's more about different end games. Back in the early 2000s, Critical Resistance started using a framework that a lot of people are using now, and almost never credit CR by the way (which I hope just means it has permeated the common sense and not that people simply don't credit CR [laughter]). We started saying that the distinction between abolitionists and reformers (or people who either have abolition as their end goal or reform as their end goal) is that reformers tend to see the system as broken—something that can be fixed with some tweaks or some changes. Whereas abolitionists think that the system works really well. They think that the PIC is completely efficient in containing, controlling, killing, and disappearing the people that it is meant to. Even if it might sweep up additional people in its wake, it is very, very effective at doing the work it's meant to do. So rather than improving a killing machine, an abolitionist goal would be to try and figure out how to take incremental steps—a screw here, a cog there—and make it so the system cannot continue—so it ceases to exist—rather than improving its efficiency. Whereas reformers, with criminal justice reform being their end goal, believe there is something worth improving there. So the groups have different end games.

I have never understood or participated in moves toward abolition that didn't take steps of some sort. A reform is just a change, right? So there can be negative reforms and there can be positive reforms. You can make a change that entrenches the system, improves its ability to function, increases its legitimacy, so: a non-abolitionist goal. Or, you can take an incremental step that steals some of the PIC's power, makes it more difficult to function in the future, or decreases its legitimacy in the eyes of the people.

I think the false distinction between reform and abolition assumes that there is some kind of pure vision that doesn't require strategy or incremental moves. If it is possible to get everybody to open all prison doors wide today, fantastic! If it is not, then what can we do to chip away, chip away, chip away so that the PIC doesn't have the ability to continually increase its power or deepen its reach and hold on our lives?

TLP: What do you see being the most significant overlaps between: the past two decades of abolitionist organizing, "Black Lives Matter," and the movement for Black

lives in its current phase? I know it's a messy question, because there are folks at the forefront who are situated both ideologically and physically at the intersections between each. Maybe a better way to phrase it is: do you see any tensions or contradictions between the abolitionist work that has unfolded over the past two decades and the emergent Black-led political forms taking shape today?

Rachel: First off, I want to be very clear: I cannot speak for Black Lives Matter. I'm not a member of Black Lives Matter, I'm not involved in that organization, and do not have the ability to speak on their strategy or form. But I know there is a distinction between them and the Movement for Black Lives, which is a network of nearly sixty Black-led organizations across the US that came together to meet first in Cleveland, and then out of that, have continued to work together. And Black Lives Matter is one of those organizations. The Movement for Black Lives recently released this policy platform, titled A Vision for Black Lives, with more than thirty policy pieces in it.

I guess I would say a few things to this question: First, I think that what we are seeing emerge today—what I would loosely call a Black protest movement, which includes a lot of these organizations and formations just mentioned—would have actually been impossible to come out in the way that is has (to have the foundation to stand on and to have people move in the way that they have) if there hadn't been growing movements against imprisonment and policing in the United States over the previous two decades. I don't know if there is a single set of politics within Black Lives Matter (and I know it's not true within the Movement for Black Lives) that compels an abolitionist orientation towards their work. I think there are some people who lean that way and I think there are some people who lean other ways and I think there are a variety of political perspectives and orientations that I've seen emerge from this broader network. I guess, at various points, I've been surprised that so little attention has been paid to the decades of work (well actually centuries of work, but recent decades in particular) done by Black people and Black organizations to fight the violence of policing in the United States; especially when the protest movement jumped off. I understand that people participating in that protest were fueled in no small part by outrage and in just complete disbelief at the scale and scope of the violence, and that people are being activated and drawn out for the first time. There are some who felt compelled to action right away and weren't necessarily connected to those other organizations or movements.

I think as the past two years have unfolded I've seen, particularly in the Movement for Black Lives, some of that leadership and some of those organizations doing good study, thinking about other Black liberationist platforms, thinking about the histories of Black struggle around a variety of other issues and really broadening their understanding of the violence facing Black people. That is, not only issues surrounding the prison industrial complex, but also the economic, social, and

political features of it. I don't know that there is a direct relationship between the previous decades of work—and again, I mean prior work along the spectrum from abolitionist to moderate reform—and these new Black protest formations. I think there is probably overlap of people, probably some overlap of thinking, and probably some overlap of strategy. But I don't know if they are in direct relationship to each other. I would say that while there can be no doubt that Black Lives Matter has had unprecedented cultural significance and impact on US popular culture (on US media and the cultural life of people in the states and globally), it is less clear to me what the organizing impact will be. And in a place like Oakland where I live, there are strong organizations with decades of strong organizing going back to the Panthers and before that set the stage differently than what might be true for other places that have a different history. So I think the longer term impacts of this most recent activism on the power of the prison industrial complex over Black lives (and the lives of people of color and Indigenous people more generally) has yet to be seen. That said, I think there has been a change in the conversation. I think there is no doubt that there is a really significant cultural impact, even though some of it is still in the making.

TLP: How do you understand the prisoner hunger strikes and other prisoner-led activisms that have occurred over the past decade in relationship to such mobilizations against policing and criminalization in the so-called "free world"?

Rachel: I think it depends on how you define mobilizations in the free world. I think there is a strong movement outside of prisons and jails. Sometimes it gets more attention and sometimes it gets less attention, but I think it has sustained. I don't necessarily think that is the same thing as this Black protest strain. Again, there are overlapping people and overlapping players and that sort of thing, but I have yet to see (which again, isn't to say that it couldn't happen) an engagement or activism beyond direct action that has meaningfully connected to more sustained organizing around imprisonment.

So I'm not sure that it's fair necessarily to say "they're not doing a good job," because I'm not sure that's their goal, right? I think the goal is a much more media focused one. With that being said, I think there is what I would call (and this is me showing my age and crabbiness about social media) an overreliance on social media which has meant that a lot of people are just left out. I personally have the luxury to make choices about being on social media or not and the choice to opt out of certain types of feeds of information and conversations. But there are many people who are living in cages who don't have access to social media. And even for those who do, they might not have access to it in the same real-time that people living outside of cages do. A lot of that organizing, a lot of that conversation happens over Twitter, happens via Facebook, happens via Instagram. So there are potentially millions of people who

don't have a voice in the conversation. Which is not to say that all imprisoned people are not finding ways to participate. There are many who are finding ways to engage. It's complicated to organize with imprisoned people and there are all kinds of structural and institutional barriers to doing that. Like I was saying, the system is set up to make people who live in cages invisible and disappeared. So it's not without all kinds of challenges. And again, I don't know necessarily if that's their intention or that's what the mobilizations against policing are set up to do.

But to return to the movement that is meant to do that and is engaged in all of that: the 2011 and 2013 prisoner-led hunger strikes in California really re-energized the movement outside of prisons and jails and activated a lot of people. The strikes gave an injection of energy. Part of that was the inspiration of the leadership of people who are imprisoned in solitary confinement, living under the most excruciating conditions that human beings can imagine. They managed to study together, build bridges across the racial divides that are perpetually stoked by the prison regimes, and were able to engage people outside of cages to take up this call to end indefinite solitary confinement—to get people in conditions that they could actually live and fight from. The work of people imprisoned inside of Pelican Bay, Corcoran, High Desert, Folsom . . . wherever they are living and working, really, was a shot in the arm for the outside movement. And I think that's sustained and spread. California isn't the only place, and California wasn't the first place. You also see Alabama, Wisconsin, West Virginia, Washington, and others. In these places you see imprisoned people using this last resort, their own bodies, to highlight just how excruciating and torturous these conditions actually are.

Pieces like the agreement to End Hostilities that came out of the California prison system and was then taken up by other communities across the state and nationally is an important organizing tool. It refocuses attention to the fact that people are always struggling inside. There are also imprisoned people who are behind the elimination of the use of sterilization on people in women's prisons, working to increase visitation or organizing against prison and jail expansion or construction. Imprisoned organizers are important players in all of these campaigns and many more.

TLP: So, to shift gears a bit, how do you suggest we think about the relationship between struggles against the aforementioned aspects of state-condoned racist domestic warfare *within* US borders and the numerous declared and undeclared imperialist wars abroad?

Rachel: There can be no doubt that there is a direct relationship between war-making at home and war-making abroad. While I do not use the word "war" lightly in the domestic context (and I know its articulations are different here than in theaters

of combat in places like Afghanistan or Iraq), I do think that it is an appropriate term to use regarding the genocidal practices at home—going back to the first attempts to exterminate Indigenous people from this land, to the ongoing structural and actual physical violence used to eliminate peoples' access and opportunity to have meaningful, healthy lives. There are some concrete overlaps. There are overlapping technologies, for instance. The weaponized drone that was recently used to kill Micah Johnson in Dallas has been used in Iraq; surveillance technologies once tested out in such theaters of war are used regularly by domestic law enforcement; data collection methods used there are also used here; etc.

I think it is oversimplified to just say: "Oh, well did you know the military is giving extra equipment to law enforcement?" That's true and that's a scandal. But that is merely a sliver of where the overlap of interests and warfare practices is happening. The people who are designing war to take place in spaces outside of the United States are influencing the tactics of law enforcement here in the United States. I think you can look at the borders as one of those places where that stuff coalesces strongly. However this is also happening in cities, in counties, and rural areas across the country. There's also a way that the logic of law enforcement in the United States is taking on an increasingly explicit war-making tenor. There are very clear examples of this such as the declared War on Drugs or War on Gangs. The enforcement of these wars uses a lot of the same tactics and technologies, but also is premised on a sense that there is an enemy that needs to be targeted and eliminated here at home.

One way this has played out dramatically is with the creation and growth of the Department of Homeland Security since September 11th and the fear-mongering around terrorism that's used to clamp down on the domestic setting. One small example of this that we have been fighting in Oakland is a program called Urban Shield. It is 48 hours of war games simulations and trainings for SWAT and other special law enforcement forces. The scenarios are incredibly racist, really sensationalized, and millions upon millions of dollars of my county's money go into these war game competitions. Simultaneously, they hold a trade expo, so you can go and get the latest night-vision goggles, the newest guns, the latest tracking softwares or stingray technology, or robots and drones. In terms of its cultural impact, in this period of increased public attention on the policing of protest you'll also see things like t-shirts with things like images of protesters in cross-hairs for sale at these tradeshows.

TLP: While we are on this topic of repression, counterinsurgency warfare, and police spying, could you speak a little bit on the politics of movement security? I don't mean this as a reiteration of criminological notions of security and securitization. I simply mean, are there certain principles, organizing strategies, or ways of collectivizing political labor that you suggest be embraced, at both organizational and larger

popular levels, which can stave off intrusion from the state or the counterrevolutionary aspirations of liberal civil society?

Rachel: This is definitely not my area of expertise [laughter], but I'll tell you what I think [more laughter]. I think organizers should always operate on the assumption that they're being watched, that their communication is being monitored, and that they likely will encounter people intent on provoking people and sharing information to discredit and disrupt organizing, particularly organizing that challenges state power. That said, I think being smart and cognizant of that is different than being paralyzed and paranoid.

My sense is that strong organizations are a good line of self-defense. Strong organizations, strong coalitions, and strong networks. Trying to go it alone, as individuals or as a handful of people is always more risky than being connected to an organizing infrastructure and a base. But people make different choices about what their tactics require and what they think is strategic. I feel quite certain that when things get more powerful they get more closely monitored. That balance between moving forward toward political goals and using common sense caution is really important. I think calling out and not cooperating with law enforcement always makes really good sense to me [laughter]. Calling out visits by law enforcement, not cooperating, and then letting people know that it's happening—those kinds of things are extremely important. Having consistency in how people get to enter spaces, when people get to participate in decision-making, those basic organizing guidelines used by many organizations for a long time, is also important.

TLP: So in the spirit of Black August, we have pulled three quotes from Assata Shakur's autobiography that we hope to solicit your opinion on. The first is as follows:

> *"I have never really understood exactly what a "liberal" is, though, since i have heard "liberals" express every conceivable opinion on every conceivable subject. As far as i can tell, you have extreme right, who are fascist, racist capitalist dogs like Ronald Reagan, who come right out and let you know where they're coming from. And on the opposite end, you have the left, who are supposed to be committed to justice, equality, and human rights. And somewhere in between these two points is the liberal. As far as i'm concerned, "liberal" is the most meaningless word in the dictionary. History has shown me that as long as some white middle-class people can live high on the hog, take vacations to Europe, send their children to private schools, and reap the benefits of their white skin privileges, then they are "liberals." But when times get hard and money gets tight they pull off that liberal mask and you think you're talking to Adolph Hitler. They feel sorry for the so-called underprivileged just as along as they can maintain their own privileges."*

What comes to mind after hearing this quote?

Rachel: I think it's an interesting point. In the movement against the prison industrial complex we have struggled a lot with . . . umm . . . liberals [laughter]—some of the most stalwart reformers where reform is their end game. I also think there is some interesting wiggle room there. What is necessary to fulfill their commitment to justice, and equality, and human rights? I mean, if there is a kernel of that there, then part of our work as organizers is to amplify our shared interests, to compel them in that direction, and also to make that compelling. That doesn't mean we always succeed or that their class interests, racial benefits, gender benefits or other sources of power they want to protect might not ultimately play them one way or the other. But thinking about where can we exploit that kernel of shared interest is interesting to me here, rather than just giving up and writing them off entirely. Of course we need to be cautious of what they are recommending and what they think is "practical" or "pragmatic." But it's our job now to push on that and to make other suggestions.

TLP: Here is the second quote:

> *"Constructive criticism and self-criticism are extremely important for any revolutionary organization. Without them, people tend to drown in their mistakes, and not learn from them."*

Rachel: Yes. I couldn't agree more [laughter]. So yes, what Assata said [more laughter]. I worry a little bit, in this period, about a lack of intellectual rigor and lack of discipline, as well as accusations of working "too slowly" or "not understanding" the sense of urgency. You know, we saw this similarly around the rise of the anti-globalization movement which I also think is a direct antecedent of what we are seeing in terms of Black protest today. Similarly, I would say that about Occupy. I would call that a direct antecedent. I don't think we would be seeing what we are seeing now without those previous movements.

TLP: Like a tactical antecedent? Or something more ideological?

Rachel: I think both. But I don't mean a one-to-one overlap, or like: this led directly to this. But more in terms of some of the orientations towards organizing and the ideological parallels. So definitely not a one-to-one, but I think influenced by quite certainly.

I think in these moments where there is a heightened investment in direct action as the primary way to move, the pacing and the urgency and all that is required

to keep up the pace sometimes makes it challenging to engage people in longer term planning, or study, or assessment. Because people are really feeling like there is no time to do that. That said, if you don't engage with decades of previous organizing, if you don't engage with where you are falling down, then you will make the same mistakes over and over. You will make mistakes made a month ago. You will make mistakes that were made ten years ago. You might make those anyways, but they might be more productive mistakes if you've made a commitment to studying movement history. The last thing I'll say about this is that it's also fucking hard. Nobody wants to confront the stuff they've messed up on, or the things they think they've done wrong, not to mention talk about their vulnerabilities. I think that also what Assata is describing is very different than a callout culture that's like "you're fucked" or "let me just describe all the ways that you've messed up." I think what she's talking about is a disciplined assessment and reflection within organizational settings on where we need to improve, where we need to tighten up, and where we need to be stronger and smarter.

TLP: This point on the pace and tempo of struggle is so crucial! I am glad you mention it. There truly is, as you say, this kind of militant presentism (and ahistoricity) unique to the so-called "Left" that is as troubling for movement-builders as the gradualist impulse of liberal antiracist reform. This point also makes for a good transition into our final quote from Shakur, which goes as follows:

> "*Just because you believe in self-defense doesn't mean you let yourself be sucked into defending yourself on the enemy's terms. One of the [Black Panther] party's major weaknesses, i thought, was the failure to clearly differentiate between aboveground political struggle and underground, clandestine military struggle.*"

Rachel: I believe in self-defense. I think that self-defense and self-determination are really key concepts if Black people want to get free. But also for all people who want to be free. In my mind, there is a certain romanticism of a very fixed and narrow conception of self-defense that I think actually comes from, well . . . actually . . . reading Assata, for instance [laughter]. And that is not to criticize her or people who read her. It's more to say, what does self-defense look like in 2016, versus in 1969 or 1973? In my mind, self-defense requires an understanding of shared fate. It requires an understanding of how what happens in El Salvador or what happens in Palestine or what happens in the Philippines impacts my ability to fight for my own liberation. Some of that has to do with the nature of US imperialism. Some of that also has to do with what we have learned, over many decades, about the power of internationalism generally, and Third World solidarity in particular.

What is required from our organizations or movements in relationship with these sectors internationally needs to be a determining force in how we shift power. Building a sense of how we defend our own abilities to live healthy, meaningful, powerful lives in relationship to people in similar conditions around the globe is a way of thinking about self-defense that I am interested in exploring further. That includes how we fight US imperialism, or how we fight for food security, or how we fight against large-scale gentrification and the march of capitalism. Toward that end, I think this idea of not being sucked into defending ourselves on the enemy's terms is important. Building these networks I've been describing is one way of determining our own course. It allows us to be proactive instead of only defensive. It allows us to say: "this is what we want to build." In a lot of ways an abolitionist vision is an example of this kind of proactive vision. It's not just: "I want to eliminate imprisonment" or "I want to eliminate the cops." It really is an affirmative ideology and practice. Affirmatively, this is the world I want to live in, therefore I need to take these steps to create the conditions that make that world possible.

Contributors

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